Chapter 1

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple Theme" ~ 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple Soundtrack

"I can't hear his voice anymore, Ian," Jimmy cried while hanging upside down on the crucifix at the Bone Temple. "Why can't I hear his voice?"

The words tore out of him raw, terrified, and smaller, stranger, more naked. And then he saw it—the towering, muscular Baphomet figure of Satan stomping toward him through the torchlight and blood-dark night. For twenty-eight years, that sight should have brought him relief. It should have felt like a rescue, like the arrival of the father, the master, the dark lord whose voice had steered him, soothed him, praised him—used him. But no relief came, only fear, complete, utter, child-deep fear.

Because in that terrible silence, something inside him finally understood what his soul had secretly known all along: the voice had never been a father's voice. It had never been guidance. It had never been love. It had been domination. A counterfeit authority, a false god—Satan, the Demiurge's static pouring through the open wound of an abandoned child, amplified by infection, terror, shame, and twenty-eight years of spiritual rot.

The "father" had not been speaking to him, the prison had, and now the signal was breaking. Now the body—the bone temple, the meat suit, the diseased cage that had carried the madness—was failing, and with it the thing that had ridden him. At that moment, the thirty-six-year-old Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal personality shattered completely. And the eight-year-old boy beneath it came screaming back to the surface.

"I want my mom," Jimmy cried, tears streaming helplessly from his blue eyes.

As the Baphomet drew nearer, Jimmy turned his head away and sobbed harder, his heart hammering in rapid, panicked beats. Blood rushed hot and sickening into his skull. His wrists burned, his chest convulsed, and with hideous clarity, he understood: the father he had served for twenty-eight years was not approaching to save him. It was coming to finish him off, to collect what fear had made useful.

"Father," Jimmy cried brokenly, his voice shaking apart with each word.
"Father...Father...why have you forsaken me? Father...Father, why have you forsaken me?"

Scene Song: "Behind Blue Eyes" ~ Limp Bizkit

~ The Afterlife ~

Jimmy lay broken and unconscious on the porch of a sprawling, sun-bleached beach house. He looked exactly as he had in those final, harrowing moments—deep purple tracksuit pants still on, his chest bare and streaked with the drying stains of struggle, his platinum hair matted damp across his face like a ruined crown. The man who had played a god of bones now looked like what he had always truly been beneath the pageantry: a discarded child in a dead man's body. Sasha Montgomery stood in the doorway, the warm Atlantic breeze moving through her hair as she stared down at him in disbelief. In March of 2026, through astral projection, Sasha had crossed into the afterlife realm of Pelmont not long after seeing 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple. In Pelmont, she had found paradise—fullness, clarity, a realm beyond fear and ruin. But she had never imagined its borders were porous enough to admit a ghost of fiction. Yet here he was, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, not standing in his own terrible grandeur, not barking decrees, not wrapped in ritual and blood and arrogance, but just lying there like something that had been used up.

His scent hit her first: blood, salt, old sweat, the metallic tang of violence. And beneath that —something else. Something sharp and *wrong*, not a smell, exactly, but a residue, a spiritual acridness, the after-vibration of corruption. As though whatever had driven him on Earth had only just been ripped loose and the air around him still remembered it. *He didn't just fight, Sasha thought. He broke.* Stooping over him, she felt that same surge of protective empathy she had felt in the theater—only stronger now, because here in Pelmont there was no screen between suffering and witness. She hooked her arms beneath his and began the grueling task of dragging him inside. He was heavy—the literal dead weight of a man who had carried the world's rage like armor. Twice she had to stop and catch her breath, his shallow, ragged breathing the only sound against the far-off crash of the surf.

In the white-tiled sanctuary of the bathroom, she moved with focused, maternal grace. She undressed him fully and lifted him into the tub, the ceramic cool beneath his battered skin. As warm water flowed over him, she washed away the grime of the wasteland—the blood from his chest, the sweat from his hair, the dirt and ruin from his limbs. Dark water swirled down the drain as the body was being cleaned, and something deeper seemed to be washing off with it too, not his guilt, not his history, not the harm, but the clinging residue of whatever had worn his wounds like reins. When she dried him, dressed him in soft denim and an oversized button-down shirt, and finally tucked him into the cool, fresh linens of the guest room, the golden beach light spilled across the bed like mercy. For the first time in twenty-eight years, Jimmy Crystal wasn't a cult leader, he wasn't a prophet of ruin, he was just a man, and in Pelmont, even a man like him was finally allowed to sleep.

Hours later, Jimmy bolted upright with a ragged gasp. His eyes snapped open. His heart battered against his ribs like a trapped bird. For a moment, he sat frozen, scanning the room in restless confusion. This wasn't the temple. It wasn't the wasteland. It wasn't dirt, rot, torchlight and infected screams. He slowly lifted his arm and touched the unfamiliar texture of a long-sleeved denim shirt. Frowning faintly, he pulled back the duvet and found sturdy jeans on his legs, his feet bare and—strangely, impossibly—clean. Someone had moved him. Someone had cleaned him. Someone had dressed him.

His throat tightened and he frowned more, because his body still remembered the cross and the helplessness of being touched like an object. Slowly getting out of bed, he stood and felt the floor cool beneath his feet, and for the first time in decades, he felt something his body had not known how to hold: lightness, not health, not peace, but the strange, fragile absence of filth. He wondered if it had been Spike. Or Jimmy Ink. Whoever it was had decided he was worth the trouble. The soft rhythm of running water drew his gaze toward the doorway. He tucked a dry lock of his platinum blond hair behind his ear and left the room.

The living room was blinding in its purity, white furniture, marble floors that glittered like fallen stars, air so clean it felt unreal. It looked less like a home than a test, like if he breathed wrong, someone might come running to punish him for existing inside it. A soft thud from the right caught his attention. Jimmy moved toward the kitchen and stopped in the doorway, hovering there like a ghost. A woman stood at the sink with her back to him, washing dishes. Beyond her, a massive window held a sun so bright and orange it looked like the whole kitchen had been set on fire with light. Jimmy's instincts rose first—automatic, sharp, defensive. His jaw tensed. His eyes narrowed. His mouth opened with something cruel already loaded on instinct, but then he swallowed it hard.

"Hello..." he said, steadier than he felt. "Who are you?"

The woman turned but she didn't flinch. Her expression didn't harden, it softened into something like quiet sympathy.

"I'm Sasha," she said gently. "Do you know where you are?"

Jimmy shook his head slowly. His gaze locked on her with the piercing intensity he had perfected as Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, only now it felt brittle, like a habit without force, a mask without a throne.

"You're in the afterlife realm of Pelmont," Sasha said. "The real universe." She studied him for a beat. "Do you believe that?"

The words hit him like a physical blow. They struck a nerve buried since he was eight years old—a nerve that had not felt the sting of truth in a lifetime. His face crumpled, not the frown of a warlord, not the confusion of a prisoner. It was the face of a child who had been lost in the dark for far too long. Tears clouded his eyes.

"Yes," he whispered, his voice cracking under the weight of a thousand sorrows. "Yes."

As he looked down, his shoulders shook. The first sobs came jagged and small, then deeper, like something in him had finally stopped bracing against collapse. Sasha crossed the space

without hesitation and pulled him into a firm, grounding hug. Jimmy folded into it, not gracefully, not all at once, but with the helpless recognition of a body that knew safety before the mind could argue with it. As his arms wrapped around her, his sobs deepened into something raw, shaking and long-denied. And in Pelmont, where pain did not stay trapped behind walls if it was finally ready to move, the grief passed through him like a storm finally finding somewhere to break.

Scene Song: "Something I can Never Have" ~ Nine Inch Nails (Acoustic)

A few minutes had passed as Jimmy sat at the heavy oak table with a coffee cup wrapped in both hands. Steam curled upward, catching the golden morning light, but his eyes stayed fixed on the dark liquid inside.

"I…I remember," he said at last, his voice low and rough. "I remember dyin' on that cross. I remember screamin' into the wind, wonderin' why I couldn't hear my father, why he'd gone silent."

He let out a jagged breath with a brief close of his eyes and a faint frown.

"And then I get here and I somehow realize..." he continued on as his fingers tapped against the cup, "I wasn't hearin' him. I was hearin' fear, static, the roar of my own pain."

His gaze dropped to the rings still decorating his fingers.

"Why'd you strip everything off me except these?"

Sasha glanced at his hands.

"I thought they were pretty," she said simply. "I thought you should keep something that was yours."

A ghost of a smile touched Jimmy's mouth, then vanished under a dark scowl of self-loathing.

"I don't *want* to be here, Sasha," he said, his Scottish lilt sharpening with desperation. "I don't belong here and I don't deserve to be here. This place is...*clean*. I'm not, I'm filth in a clean place like this. I can't make amends to the dead, so I shouldn't be among them in paradise."

"But you *can* make amends," Sasha said quietly. "I think that's exactly why you were sent to my porch. So you could finally fix what was broken. I can tell Spike and Kellie you're here. And Ian too."

Jimmy's brow furrowed sharply.

“Ian? Ian, I know—but...*Spike*? Jimmy Ink? They’re here? They died too?”

A flash of old protective paranoia crossed his face.

“Was it the infected? Tell me it wasn’t the infected.”

Sasha nodded slowly, sadness moving through her eyes.

“Spike and Kellie died not long after they left the Bone Temple. They don’t like to talk about how, but they’re here now, they’re safe.”
Jimmy exhaled hard, bit down on his lower lip, and stared at the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Then he looked up at her, bewildered by his own pain.

“How is it that I feel sorry?” he asked. “Why do I feel this strong, *strong* hurt like this?”

Sasha reached across the table and took his hand.

“It’s the nature of this realm,” she said. “In the world of flesh, terrible things are often born from a sickness of the body and from wounds carved deep into the mind—trauma, fear, violation, shame. Those things don’t just scar a person, they can leave them spiritually open.”

Jimmy went very still. Sasha kept her voice low and steady.

“I don’t think you were born wrong, Jimmy. I think you were broken open young, open enough for darker things to get in.”

His throat bobbed.

“You mean the infection?”

“Not just the infection,” Sasha said, “that was part of it, but not the root. The root was older —childhood terror, abandonment, the false father, the Vicar father you *really* had, all that pain. I think your body and mind became a breach. And through that breach came the influence of a malevolent entity called the Demiurge and his fellow entities called archons.”

Jimmy stared at her before he faintly frowned with a slight tilt of his head.

“The Demiurge?” he asked.

“Yeah, he’s a false god,” Sasha continued, “he’s the counterfeit light, the thing that rules the prison of flesh through fear and distortion. In Gnostic thought and belief, the body is equivalent to a tomb, a shackle, a bone temple, if you will. It’s a place where the divine spark gets trapped beneath trauma and sickness and static.”

Jimmy’s fingers tightened around the cup.

“So I’m not...” His voice dropped, “built wrong?”

“No,” Sasha said, “your mind was hijacked.”

Hijacked, that word hit him hardest.

“When you crossed into Pelmont,” she said, “the static broke, the body that carried the madness failed. The voice that drove you to do the things you did couldn’t follow the same way. Here, your soul isn’t becoming good. It’s being revealed. For the first time, you’re reacting with your *heart* instead of your scars.”

Jimmy stared at her with that same cold, unblinking intensity he once used to terrify others, but there was nothing hard in it now, only shock, ache and hope so frightening that it almost looked like pain.

“A soul stripped of madness,” he whispered, “before it gets—remade.”

Sasha nodded.

“Not remade,” she said, “*unburdened*.”

Jimmy looked down at his chest as if he expected to see the wasteland physically peeling off him.

“If that’s true...” he responded as his eyes lifted back to her, “then for twenty-eight years I wasn’t even *there*. I was...I was a passenger in a ghost.”

Pins and needles seemed to move through him. It was spiritual circulation returning to parts of himself that had become numb in childhood. He gave a choked, hollow laugh.

“I spent my whole life building a temple to my own pain and trauma,” he whispered, his Scottish accent thick with grief. “I forced everyone else to worship at it.”

His eyes went distant.

“Similar to The Bone Temple,” he said softly. “For fuck’s sake.”

His face twisted with disgust and dawning realization.

“I called it that because somewhere in me I knew, didn’t I? I somehow knew the body was the cage, the bone, the prison. I built a whole fuckin’ religion around the very thing that trapped me.”

He looked back at Sasha, shaken to the marrow.

“And now you’re telling me...” he said, his voice cracking, “you’re telling me that the little boy who watched his mother and sisters become infected...the little boy who just wanted his father to stay...he’s the one who’s actually here? He’s me? I’m him?”

The transference of Sasha’s kindness became too much, not because he rejected it—but because he could feel it landing now. He snatched his hand away, stood abruptly, and crossed to the kitchen window. Orange sunlight filled the glass. His reflection looked ghostly there.

“It’s a cruel joke, isn’t it?” he asked tiredly, “to finally be me only after there’s nothing left to save.”

Then he turned back to her with a faint frown on his face, tears glistening in his eyes.

“Spike. Jimmy Ink. Ian. I can’t make amends with them. I’ve done too much damage; the bridge is burnt.”

“You’d be surprised what is possible here,” Sasha said. “All you have to do is try. Show them the man standing in this kitchen right now—not the evil cult leader they saw on Earth.”

Jimmy listened, but his heart remained a fortress. For twenty-eight years, forgiveness had been a fairy tale. He had been forged in violence, raised in a cult of fear, and driven by a voice he had mistaken for fatherhood. To believe that Ian, or Spike, or Jimmy Ink could look at him and see anything but a monster felt like a luxury he did not know how to survive.

Scene Song: “Apologize” ~ Timbaland Ft. OneRepublic

The beach house's living room felt smaller than it had moments before. Ian, Spike, Kellie, Cathy, and Tom sat together on the pristine white sofa—too close, like proximity itself was a defense. In Pelmont, their bodies looked whole and clean again, but their eyes still carried wasteland reflexes.

“Why are we here, Sasha?” Kellie asked sharply. “You said someone needed to see us.”

Sasha’s answer was quiet.

“He does.”

Jimmy stepped out from the kitchen and stopped in the doorway as if he had walked into a courtroom he already knew he’d lose. A nervous ghost of a smile flickered—and died instantly under what hit him back. Spike and Kellie jolted to their feet like the room had caught fire. Spike stumbled backward toward the wall, his face twisting with raw, animal terror. Kellie’s hands curled into fists, already bracing for the next command, the next cruelty. Ian didn’t run. He just rose slowly with his shoulders tight and his eyes wide with cold, clinical alertness—his body waiting for proof the nightmare had followed him into paradise. Jimmy took one step forward, then stopped as the rejection hit him like a wall.

“You...you all don’t have to be afraid,” Jimmy said, his Scottish lilt thick and unsteady, “not here, not now. I’m not—”

Jimmy stopped and swallowed hard.

“I’m not here to do that.”

“Do that?” Kellie repeated with a sharp, humorless laugh.

She stepped toward him, eyes blazing.

“Like you didn’t build a whole kingdom out of it. Like you didn’t turn murder into theater.”

Each word cut Jimmy clean, and Jimmy shut his eyes like he deserved every blade.

“I know,” Jimmy said in a low tone that was almost a whisper. “I know what I was.”

Jimmy forced himself to look up at them—his eyes already glassy, already losing the fight.

“Kellie...Spike...*Ian*—”

When Jimmy said Ian’s name, his voice fractured completely.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” Jimmy said, shaking his head slightly as if trying to shake the past off his skin. “I know sorry doesn’t fix anything. I *know* it doesn’t, but the sickness is gone and all that’s left is—”

Jimmy stopped and pressed a fist against his chest.

“*This*,” Jimmy said, “the shame, the horrid knowing.”

Cathy stood then, her gaze surgical and cold.

“*Don’t*.”

She said one word, a warning, and Jimmy’s breath hitched.
“Cathy, *please*—”

“Don’t you dare bring sorry into my life like it’s a bridge!” Cathy snapped. “You *butchered* my family and my friends for a lie you called holy—*charity*. So you don’t get to apologize and expect it to change the dead.”

Spike’s eyes were wet with fury. Kellie’s whole face had gone hard with effort. Jimmy looked down, his shoulders slightly shaking.

“You have every right,” he said, “*every* fuckin’ right to hate me.”

Jimmy lifted his eyes again—not demanding, just begging.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me today. I’m not asking for peace. I’m asking for *one* chance, one chance to prove I’m not here to hurt anyone anymore.”

Ian tilted his head slightly, studying him like a phenomenon he didn’t trust.

“Why should we give you anything?” Spike asked flatly.

Jimmy swallowed painfully.

“Because I *see* now,” Jimmy responded, his tears spilling freely. “I see what I did. I see who I was. And I...”

Jimmy stopped as his breath broke.

“I can’t carry all this alone here if I’m meant to become something else.”
Kellie’s face twisted, grief and rage colliding.

“*No*,” she said firmly.

She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

“*Wait*!” Jimmy said as he lurched forward. “*Please*—just—”

And with that, the exodus began. Spike followed without a word. Cathy walked past Jimmy like he was nothing but a stain on marble. Jimmy stumbled after her, but stopped short of the threshold as though some unseen law of Pelmont would not let him chase forgiveness like prey. Jimmy’s knees buckled and he doubled over, sobbing—loud, jagged, helpless. Ian lingered one beat longer than the others. His eyes searched Jimmy’s face, trying to understand what kind of man cried like this. Then Ian turned and walked out into the sun. Jimmy couldn’t let it end like that though. He scrambled onto the porch with his vision blurred with tears, and grabbed Spike’s arm—too desperate, too fast.

Spike whirled and shoved him back *hard* on instinct, not cruelty but with reflex.

“Stay away from us!” Spike roared—then froze, like he couldn’t believe his own body had chosen violence in a realm built of clean light.

Jimmy collapsed anyway, dropping into the white sand with his head bowed and his shoulders heaving, and at this moment, Jimmy looked impossibly small there. Sasha came out behind him, knelt down, and wrapped her arms around his shaking, sobbing frame. And as Jimmy watched the only people who could offer him peace disappear into the golden distance, he understood something the wasteland had never taught him: Redemption was not a prize waiting at the gates of paradise. It was a climb, and he had only just taken the first step.

Chapter 2

Scene Song: "Everything In Its Right Place" ~ Radiohead

Later, inside the house, Sasha sat at the kitchen table with her coffee gone cold, staring out at the horizon. Her thoughts kept circling back to Spike, Kellie, Cathy, and Tom—to the way fear still lived in their bodies like muscle memory. How did you bridge a gap made of twenty-eight years of blood? She didn't hear the front door click softly shut. Jimmy slipped out like a shadow. He had returned to the guest room and unearthed the ghosts of himself. He didn't want the soft denim. The clean linen. The quiet mercy Sasha had given him. It felt wrong, stolen, unearned. He wanted friction. He wanted consequences. So he dressed himself in the thing he hated most: the dark purple tracksuit, the chains, and the tiara—glittering and damned—and the crucifix too, not as comfort, not as faith, but as *punishment*. He put it on like a man fastening shackles around his own chest. Outside, the white sand crunched under his sneakers. The tide hissed at the shore like a warning that never stopped. Jimmy dropped to his knees and closed his eyes—

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple" ~ 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple Soundtrack

—And Pelmont—merciless in its truth—pulled memory over him like a wave. He wasn't just remembering. He was *there*. An eight-year-old boy sat cross-legged in front of a flickering television while the Teletubbies wobbled across the screen in bright childish colors. His sisters laughed nearby, alive for one more second. Then teeth—screams, the wet, brutal snapping of infected mouths. Jimmy saw his cousins fall. He saw his sisters vanish into the horror. He saw himself standing before the glass door that separated him from his mother.

"Run, Jimmy! Run!" she wailed.

Then darkness took her.

"Mom..." Jimmy tearfully whispered on the beach, rocking as if his body could not stop. "Mom..."

And then came the sharpest wound of all: his father, the Vicar, the man who should have been his shield. In the memory, little Jimmy ran to him sobbing, desperate for anything that resembled safety, and in return, his father gave him a doctrine of how that day was a day of judgment. And then he shoved Jimmy away and left him to the wolves. On the beach, Jimmy's throat clenched. The old words tore out anyway—not because he believed in them, not because he suddenly loved religion, but because they had been branded into the deepest wound in him, carved there by church and blood and abandonment and the counterfeit fatherhood of terror. Then, all at once, he felt it again—wood beneath his spine, nails in his

wrists, the world upside down, the starry night sky boiling above him, panic shredding his throat. Salt. Blood. *Terror*, and out of him came the same cry as before.

"*Father*," Jimmy sobbed while on the beach, with tears streaming from his closed eyes. "Father...why have you forsaken me?"

The plea drove through him like the nail all over again. Then the rest played in flashes: the rise of Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal. The murders. The farmhouse. The way he built a kingdom out of damage so he would never have to feel small again. The way he mistook possession for purpose. The way he mistook the Demiurge's static for a father's voice because naming it that had hurt less than naming it what it was. And then— Ian. In the cold clarity of the afterlife, Jimmy finally understood why Ian had gotten so deeply under his skin. It wasn't just that Ian spoke to him like a person. It was that Ian represented the ordinary world the false father had stolen from him before he ever had the chance to grow into it. It was the steadiness, the decency, the human recognition, a life that wasn't built on terror. Ian had looked at him like a man. And if someone like Ian had found that eight-year-old boy in the church—if someone had offered safety instead of scripture, warmth instead of doctrine, a hand instead of abandonment—Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal might never have existed at all.

Scene Song: "Stand By Me" ~ Ben E. King

Jimmy opened his eyes with a violent gasp and slumped forward, forehead almost to the sand. Shame pressed down on him like a physical weight. He sobbed—deep and guttural—like his body was trying to cough up a lifetime.

"Jimmy."

The voice was soft, nearly swallowed by wind and surf.

"*Jimmy*," it came again—*firmer*.

Jimmy looked up, his face wet and raw—and saw Ian standing a few feet away. Jimmy flinched like he'd been caught. He turned his head sharply, shame flooding him so fast it made him dizzy.

"Oh—no," Jimmy sobbed. "Just…go away."

Ian didn't argue. He didn't lecture. He just knelt in the sand with slow, deliberate care, like he was approaching an injured animal, and pulled Jimmy into a powerful, grounding hug. At first Jimmy went rigid—and then the warmth broke him. Ian's hand moved through Jimmy's platinum hair in a steady, fatherly rhythm, and whatever fight Jimmy had left collapsed. He clutched Ian's shirt and the sobs turned into the loud, desperate wails of a child who'd been holding his breath for twenty-eight years. The tracksuit, the chains, the tiara—were hollow costumes. Inside, Jimmy was just raw *nerve*, pain, trauma, loneliness and an eight-year-old boy still trapped in that church doorway. After a few minutes, Ian pulled back just enough to meet his eyes and his own gaze slightly shimmered.

“I’ve spent my life studying the broken,” Ian said quietly. “And I know what you’re looking for.”

Jimmy’s breath hitched.

“You’re looking for a father who won’t turn his back on you when the world gets dark,” Ian continued, “a father who won’t reject you because you’re afraid.”

Ian swallowed, his emotion tightening his throat.

“If you’ll allow me, Jimmy…I’d like to be that for you here in the afterlife. Someone you can depend on. Someone *real*, someone who *stays*.”

Jimmy stared at him, his chest heaving. The child in him finally looked out through the adult’s eyes.

“I…” Jimmy whispered, his voice wrecked. “I need a father, *please*.”

The word *please* came out smaller, *younger*, and cracked straight down to bone. Ian nodded once, then pulled him back into the embrace, rubbing his arms with steady protective warmth. On that beach in the afterlife of Pelmont, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was finally allowed to be small. And for the first time in his existence—Jimmy Crystal was *safe*.

Scene Song: “Fix You” ~ Coldplay

The waves kept their slow, rhythmic dance against the shore as the storm inside Jimmy finally began to ease. He rose to his feet carefully, like standing up meant trusting gravity again. Ian stood with him—steady as a lighthouse, close enough to catch him if the ground turned cruel. Ian reached out and cupped Jimmy’s face in his hands—the same gesture from those final, desperate moments at the Bone Temple. But there was no fear here, no rope, no waiting for pain, no words passed between them. In the hush of Pelmont, Ian’s thoughts moved into Jimmy’s mind like warm light: *It’s over, Jimmy. The haunting is done. You’re not alone.*

The assurance didn’t feel like a miracle. It felt like something heavy was finally being taken off of Jimmy. Jimmy nodded, a faint frown appearing on his face, like his face didn’t fully trust peace yet. It was the expression of a young man learning, painfully, that he was allowed to breathe. Then Ian’s gaze lifted past Jimmy’s shoulder, and his expression softened into a small, bright smile. Jimmy turned. Walking across the white sand were Spike…and the woman Jimmy had once tried to erase. Jimmy’s breath caught hard.

“Jimmy Ink—”

He stopped himself. Closed his eyes for a brief second, as if physically pushing the old habit out of his mouth. When he opened them again, his voice came lower—clearer.

“Kellie,” Jimmy said in a low tone.

He looked from her to the young teen beside her.

“Spike…I know,” he added quietly. “I know it’s a lot to ask. But I am *sorry*, *really*. And I can’t undo what I did—” his throat bobbed as he swallowed, “—but I’m askin’ for a chance to do different.”

Spike and Kellie stood still, the weight of everything unsaid hanging in the air like a held breath. Their eyes flicked to Ian—who remained beside Jimmy like a father beside a trembling son. Ian didn’t speak. He only gave a slow, calm nod. *He’s real now, the look said. He’s not hiding.* Spike moved first. He stepped forward and extended his hand. Jimmy stared at it for half a heartbeat like the gesture was too good to be true—then took it.

And instead of letting go, he pulled Spike in, not violently, not possessively. Just…desperate and *human*. Spike stiffened for a second—then didn’t pull away. So Jimmy held on like a man learning what safety feels like when it’s offered and not taken. When they separated, Jimmy turned to Kellie. She hadn’t moved. Arms crossed, her eyes sharp. But there was something different in her face now—less fury, more vigilance. Like she was standing guard over her own heart.

“Kellie?” Jimmy asked, his brow lifting—not demanding. Just asking.

Her jaw worked once, and then she said it, steady as a warning carved into stone.

“Don’t make me regret this, Jimmy.”

Jimmy shook his head slowly, solemn as a vow.

“I won’t,” he said, soft—but absolute. His accent grounded it like a nail being driven in.

He reached for her. Kellie flinched—small, involuntary—the old fear still living in her muscles like a reflex. Jimmy froze instantly, hands lifting back a fraction like: *I’ll stop. I’ll wait.*

Kellie’s breath came out long and shaky. Then she stepped forward anyway and wrapped her arms around him, tight, real, not gentle—but *honest*. Jimmy shut his eyes, and for a second he looked like he might emotionally break again—except this time it wasn’t grief. It was the shock of being allowed back into the world. As Jimmy and Kellie released from the hug, Ian stepped in and draped a heavy, steady arm across Jimmy’s shoulders, anchoring him. Jimmy leaned into it without even thinking, like his body recognized the shape of a father before his mind could argue. As the three of them started walking up the shoreline together, the gold and purple and glitter of old armor didn’t disappear in a dramatic moment. It simply… stopped mattering. Cloth and metal, losing their power one step at a time. In their place walked a young man who had finally been found. Redemption had been a mountain, but Jimmy Crystal wasn’t climbing it alone anymore.

Chapter 3

Scene Song: "Get Here" ~ Oleta Adams

~ Six Months Later ~

Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal walked downstairs into the main living room of his house—*his* house—and the fact still didn't sit right in his chest. The place was bright and quiet, all clean angles and soft colors, like peace had been painted onto the walls and told to behave. He dragged one ringed finger along the cool, light-gray paint as he passed the entryway and into the kitchen. The island's marble gleamed warm under the morning light, brown veins running through it like a slow, steady pulse. Jimmy sat in one of the royal-blue chairs and exhaled hard. He wasn't sad, not exactly.
He also wasn't happy. It was something in-between—*melancholy,* the kind that crept in when the world finally stopped screaming and you were left alone with yourself. His gaze moved over the room, taking in every quiet, careful detail, and the same thought returned like it always did: *None of this exists unless she did.*

Sasha Montgomery—his mind already knew her full name the way a heartbeat knows its own rhythm. He didn't know her the way you knew someone in flesh, but he knew her anyway: in flashes, in impressions, in the strange afterlife intimacy of thought and feeling. She'd called him into being—called him *whole.* She'd given him a home inside Pelmont, where the archonic madness didn't cling to his bones anymore, where calm sat in the air like it belonged, and he still couldn't understand why. On Earth—*his* Earth, the one soaked in ruin—he had been ruthless, not just cruel, but *warped,* locked inside a sickness so loud it had sounded like religion. Everyone who heard the story wrote him off: even Spike, even Kellie, even Ian at first.

And from what Jimmy had tasted of Sasha's thoughts, even the actor who played him—Jack O'Connell, some British bloke Jimmy had never heard of—called Jimmy sociopathic and perhaps insane. Sasha, however, never had. She'd looked at the same monster and—somehow—saw the boy underneath, the one no one ever bothered to save, the more he thought about all of that, the more he felt tears flood his bright, ocean blue eyes. This young woman had apparently deemed him as her younger brother in her mind. Thinking about that made him smile faintly. On Earth, before the infected took over Scotland, Jimmy had six sisters, six of whom he lost within the span of a few minutes. However, somehow, he gained a *new* sister, one who somehow felt closer to him than his original six sisters. How that was a factual thing baffled Jimmy. That shouldn't have been possible. Yet it *was*. Jimmy sucked his teeth and stared at the sparkling countertop until it blurred.

The house was beautiful. His life was—by every definition—*safe*. He had Ian. He had Spike. He had Kellie. And still, some part of him felt alone. Because the one person who had *made*

room for him—the one who had fought for him before she'd ever even arrived—was still on the other side of the veil. *Eventually,* she'd said. She had plans. Eventually wasn't fast enough. He closed his eyes and reached—not with hands, but with that Pelmont sense Sasha had never taught him directly, the way you learn a language just by being around it long enough. He tried to find her, tried to touch the edge of her mind without pulling too hard, and then a song slid into his hearing like it had been placed there.

"Get Here" by Oleta Adams. He didn't know the singer. He'd never heard the track a day in his life, and still—he knew the lyrics, because *she* did. The message formed itself inside him, simple as breath: *Get here. Please.* The vision hit. Her, on Earth—early morning light, bed sheets, sleep still clinging to her. Her hand reached for her phone. Earbuds.

The search. The download. The first notes. And then she broke into tears. Because she understood. She knew it wasn't random. She knew it was *him.* Jimmy's breath caught so sharply it hurt. He opened his eyes, and they were already clouded with tears. Watching her cry through the vision hit him with a force that almost knocked him sideways—like their bond was a wire strung too tight, and her pain made it sing. He dropped his head into his hands and broke—quietly at first, then shaking. His light sobs turned rougher, not the theatrical sobs of the cross, not the violent roar of the wasteland—just a man overwhelmed by the fact that he could *feel* at all. When it passed, he wiped his tears away hard with his palms like he was angry at the tears for existing. He sat there with his eyes closed and he didn't speak, but the silence said everything. *Hurry up, Sasha. I'm here. I'm trying to be patient and wait, wait until the day I can finally thank you, face to face for doing what no one else ever did—for giving me a chance to become real and redeemed.*

Scene Song: "Promised Land" ~ 28 Years Later - The Bone Temple

~ Four Months Later ~

It was a bright, sun-washed morning in the afterlife of Pelmont, Pelmont. Jimmy was dead asleep when he suddenly shot upright, his eyes wide. He didn't know how he knew—but he just did. His sister had arrived. He launched out of bed in white socks, gray sweatpants, and a plain white shirt, and sprinted downstairs like the house was on fire. He shoved open the front blue door and stepped out into the light, chest heaving. His head snapped to the right—and there she was. Five-foot-two, black hair that was longer now and flowing off her shoulders, denim overall dress. Real. *Here*. The smile that broke across Jimmy's face was the same bright, electric one Sasha remembered from the film—except this time it wasn't performance. It was *relief*.

"Sasha!" Jimmy shouted, and then he was running.

"Jimmy!" Sasha shouted back, running too—

They met halfway. Jimmy grabbed her and lifted her clean off the ground like she weighed nothing, spinning her around as he laughed—loud, boyish, disbelieving.

"*Finally*," he blurted out, his Scottish lilt coming in thicker. "Aye, I thought you'd never fuckin' get here. D'you know how long I've been waitin'? Felt like fuckin' forever."

Sasha laughed, breathless, and hugged him again, tighter.

"I know," she said, pulling back just enough to look at him—her eyes shining with tears, "and look at you."

She cupped his face in both hands.

"You're just as adorable as you were in the movie!"

Jimmy made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a laugh and turned his head away, trying—and failing—not to smile. He gently peeled her hands off his cheeks like he was allergic to tenderness.

"I could describe myself with a lot of words," he said with a faint frown and a half smile, his voice dry, "but adorable would not be makin' the fuckin' list, Sasha."

Sasha laughed again, and Jimmy's mouth twitched like he was pretending not to love the sound of her laugh.

"Come on," he said, already wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in close —protective and brotherly. "Let's get inside. I'll fix us some coffee."

And together they walked back toward his house, side by side—like they'd been doing it their whole lives.

Scene Song: "Best Friend" (Instrumental) ~ Brandy

Jimmy sat on the island opposite her, their cups of coffee steaming between them.

"I want to thank you," Jimmy said, wearing that soft smile that still looked strange on him.

Sasha's brow lifted.

"Thank me? For what?"

"For not throwing me away when everyone else did," he said, nodding once—small, familiar. "From what I could read of your thoughts…I'm not liked at all down on Earth, especially after they made that—film about me."

His jaw flexed.

“Everyone hates me down there. And then you’ve got—”

He stopped and squinted as if the word offended him.

“—women actin’ like I’m some kind of fuckin’ collectible. A…sex object or whatever.”

He paused, then shrugged with a wicked little smile.

“…Which—I mean—I’m not complaining *too* much about. Obviously.”

Sasha burst out laughing. Jimmy lifted a brow, thinking.

“Actually,” he continued, “you know, I don’t even know if that devotion’s towards *me* or that —O’Connell figure wearing my fuckin’ face.”

“Oh no,” Sasha said immediately, dead serious. “I think it was towards you, there were women making love videos to you on TikTok and shit.”

Jimmy stared at her with a brow raised and a frown.

“TikTok? What the fuck is that, some kind of digital disease?”

Sasha looked at him with an amused smile and then briefly looked away with a shake of her head to keep from laughing.

“Never mind,” she responded with a faint smile, “but just know that yeah, the devotion was towards you, just as it was towards another character named Remmick that Jack played in another film—”

“Remmick?” Jimmy asked with brows raised and a faint frown. “That sounds like the name of a fuckin’ gun or some shite.”

Sasha almost choked on her coffee, laughing.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, “I saw that O’Connell guy in one of the videos you watched on your computer. The fuckin’ bloke looks like a *before* photo, looks nothin’ like me.”

Sasha heartily laughed again. Jimmy shook his head, then his expression sobered—quietly.

“Anyway,” he said, his voice lower now, “you didn’t look at me and see a monster to judge, or a fuckin’—*fantasy* to drool over. You looked at me and saw a person. You saw the child that never left the inside of me in all my twenty-eight years, the one that needed to be fixed and changed and redeemed.”

He swallowed, annoyed at how his throat tightened.

“…Shite. Listen to me,” he said before lightly laughing, shaking his head and then faintly smiling.

Sasha reached across and took his hand.

“Thank you for *letting* me help you to become changed and redeemed,” she said softly. Jimmy nodded once, still with his faint smile.

<u>Scene Song: “Take A Picture” ~ Filter</u>

“Although,” he added, leaning back with a tilt of his head, “I’m not changing my cussing habit. That I’m fuckin’ keeping, and my tiara and my rings, and me occasionally wearing a track suit, because I look pretty damn good in them if I fuckin’ say so myself.”

Sasha laughed.

“Good,” she responded with a smile, “and I like the Sir Lord part too. It’s royally you. We can just pretend you got the title after you were knighted by Queen Elizabeth, once upon a time on Earth or something.”

Jimmy’s eyes briefly widened and his brows raised as he smiled like an excited child.

“Now *that*,” he said, still smiling, “is excellent. Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, knighted by the Queen. Aye. I’m keepin’ that. That is official fuckin’ history now.”

Sasha laughed, bright and helpless, because that was so perfectly Jimmy she didn’t even know how to answer it for a second.

“Oh and I should warn you though—by you being my younger brother, expect me to overprotectively mother you. A lot, like you’re some adorable wee puppy I’ve decided is mine now. I do it to everyone though. I always have.”

Jimmy just stared at her, smiling in silence like he was trying to read her soul, then shook his head and let out a short laugh.

“Aye, no you won’t,” he said. “Absolutely the fuck not.”

“Yes I will,” Sasha teased.

“Nope,” Jimmy said, his smile widening. “If anyone’s doin’ the overprotectin’ around here, it’s me. Over you.”

Sasha laughed, and Jimmy leaned in and briefly hugged her close.

“There’s just one thing I do want to take you to do though,” she said—nervous now.

Jimmy raised his brows over the rim of his coffee and took a slow sip.

“Aye?” he said. “What are we doin’?”

Scene Song: “Everybody Wants You” ~ Billy Squier

Out front of Sasha’s place, Jimmy sat in the front passenger seat of her Lincoln Navigator, in his black tracksuit with white stripes, an expensive, white pair of Jordans, and his signature tiara on like he was about to headline a royal tour. The long sunroof was wide open, allowing sunlight to pour down into the car. In the backseat was Sasha’s other brother, Skylar—the cool, sarcastic one—along with Kellie and Spike beside him. As Sasha started the engine, “Everybody Wants You” by Billy Squier came on, instantly grabbing Jimmy’s attention. He glanced down at the stereo with a brow raised and a half-smile.

“That’s *fuckin’* Billy Squier,” Jimmy said, pointing at the display like it personally impressed him.

He looked over at Sasha, smile widening.

“How’d you know his music?”

Sasha frowned briefly while smiling, as if he’d just asked if she knew what oxygen was.

“Oh please,” she said. “I grew up on his songs—and all types of rock.”

When the track kicked into that big drum intro, Jimmy cranked the volume to the maximum, while nodding hard to the beat, arms up in the air like he was front row at a Metallica show. Sasha and Spike laughed as Sasha pulled off down the street. Jimmy danced in his seat like it was a talent. He sang every line and by the second chorus, Kellie and Sasha were singing and moving with him too.

Scene Song: “Ironic” ~ Alanis Morissette

Forty minutes later, they pulled into Sand Oak Dental Care—right as “Ironic” by Alanis Morissette came on. Sasha parked. Jimmy stared at the off-white sign—*SAND OAK DENTAL* in light blue.

“Sand Oak Dental,” Jimmy read aloud, disgusted. “That sounds like a place where joy goes to die.”

Jimmy then slowly looked over at Sasha, brow lifting.

“Why are we here, Sasha?” Jimmy asked.

“For you,” Sasha said, smiling. “Today’s the day we get that smile of yours pearly white.”

Jimmy stared at her for a beat, then shook his head, his frown deepening even as a disbelieving smile tried to form.

“Oh no. No, no, no,” he said, laughing. “That’s not *fuckin’* happening.”

Sasha sighed and rolled her eyes. Kellie laughed under her breath, shaking her head.

“I told ya,” she muttered, “you’d have an easier time getting him to wear plaid or something.”

Kellie and Spike laughed.

“Okay,” Jimmy said, glancing at Sasha with sudden seriousness, “let’s get out of here. Let’s find a restaurant or something because I’m fuckin’ starved—”

“Jimmy, we’re going inside, and that’s final,” Sasha said, firmly.

Jimmy looked at her with a brow raised and a half-smile.

“This is that mothering shite you were talking about earlier, isn’t it?” he asked, making a little circular gesture at her with his finger as the frown slowly built.

“No,” Skylar sighed, popping a piece of gum into his mouth. “This is that ‘you need to get your teeth fixed because in Pelmont there’s no apocalypse, so like—why the hell not?’ shite.”

Skylar and Spike laughed. Jimmy rolled his eyes, sighed, and sank back into the seat, staring down at his hands like he was preparing for battle.

“I don’t trust—doctors and dentists, Sasha,” Jimmy said, low.

Sasha laughed softly, then reached over and took his hand.

“Aww, you’re scared—”

“I’m not fuckin’ scared,” Jimmy snapped, giving her that sharp, warning stare she’d seen in the film.

“Jimmy, it’s fine,” Spike said with a shrug. “I can’t count how many times I’ve been to the dentist. Nothing bad ever happened to me.”

Jimmy glanced at Spike through the rearview mirror, then rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Jimmy,” Sasha said warmly, “you have an absolutely beautiful smile. Imagine how much more beautiful it would be with healthy, pearly whites.”

Jimmy looked at her with his brow raised—then he smiled.

“Really? You think my smile is beautiful?”

“Of course,” Sasha said with a smile and a nod.

“Yeah right,” Kellie said with a smirk. “I think your smile is fucking creepy.”

As Kellie laughed, Jimmy rolled his eyes, put on a brief, fake-smile, and flipped her the middle finger—making Spike, Skylar, Kellie, and Sasha crack up.

“Yeah, love you too, Jimmy,” Kellie said, amused.

“Jimmy…look, I get it,” Sasha said, leaning in towards him. “You don’t trust doctors or dentists. But do you trust *me*?”

Jimmy looked over at her, searching her face like the answer mattered more than he wanted it to.

“Of course I fuckin’ do,” he responded after a beat, nodding once.

“Good,” Sasha said. “Then know I wouldn’t let anyone—doctors or dentists included—do anything bad to you. I promise.”

She smiled.

“You’re my brother and my BFF.”

Jimmy frowned, confused.

“BFF?”

“Best friend forever,” Sasha said before laughing lightly.

Jimmy nodded, looking away for a second.

“I want you to do this because I care,” she said, softer now. “I genuinely care, all right?”

Jimmy’s gaze dropped. Then he sighed—long and resigned—and nodded

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As Jimmy, Sasha, Skylar, Spike and Kellie walked into the dentist's office, and as Jimmy and Sasha stepped up to the front desk, the receptionist’s eyes moved from Sasha’s brown skin to Jimmy’s fair complexion and back again, lingering just long enough to make the judgment obvious. The receptionist, a plump red-head female with freckles and an old-fashioned, big bouffant hairstyle displayed a contrived smile at Jimmy and Sasha.

“Hi, how may I help you?” the receptionist asked.

“Yes,” Sasha said, “he’s here for his dental appointment.”

The receptionist nodded, typing.

“Name?”

Jimmy lifted his chin.

“Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal.”

The receptionist paused mid-keystroke. Slowly looked up.

“*Sir…Lord*?”

Jimmy frowned like *she* was the confusing one.
“Aye.”

Sasha cut in smoothly.

“Just put Jimmy Crystal. My brother’s big on labels.”

The receptionist’s eyes flicked between them, a beat too long.

“Oh—*your* brother?” the receptionist said, her voice catching. “I just meant...you don’t—”

Jimmy’s stare went cold.

“*Finish* that sentence,” he said in a low but icy tone.

Sasha sighed, polite but firm.

“He’s my brother from another mother, all right?”

The receptionist flushed.

“Right. Of course. I’m sorry—”

“Aye, you are,” Jimmy leaned in a fraction, his voice flat.

The receptionist cleared her throat, eyes dropping back to the screen.

“Birthdate?”

“December twenty-first, nineteen ninety-four,” Jimmy replied, still staring at her like she owed him an apology, a check, and immediate silence.

“The dentist will call you shortly.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes as they stepped away.

“I don’t like her,” he muttered, “her hair looks like it’s tryna pick up fuckin’ satellite signals.”

Sasha laughed.

“No one likes her here in Pelmont,” Sasha replied, “well, except for Doctor Lewis, so….”

Just then, a side door opened up and a tall, gray-haired, male dentist walked out into the waiting room with a clipboard in his hand.

“Jimmy Crystal?” the dentist—Doctor Lewis said.

“Yeah, he left—like about—a minute ago. Ya just missed him,” Jimmy said while nodding and gesturing towards the door and standing.

Sasha sucked her teeth and smiled.

“Doctor Lewis, he’s right here,” she said while taking hold of Jimmy’s arm.

Jimmy sighed and rolled his eyes before stalking over to the dentist. Doctor Lewis smiled and draped an arm around Jimmy’s shoulder. Jimmy’s whole body went taut. For one sharp second, it wasn’t a dentist’s hand he felt—it was the sick memory of being physically forced into place on the crucifix. Jimmy looked down at the hand on him with one brow raised, then shoved the man’s arm off.

“You’re in good hands, Jimmy, so *relax*,” Doctor Lewis said.

Jimmy stared at Doctor Lewis with a sour frown, entirely put off by Doctor Lewis’s welcoming behavior.

“Yeah, sure I am,” Jimmy said, rolling his eyes as if he’d just been lied to in a particularly lazy way.

As Doctor Lewis and Jimmy walked back behind a door that led to a back hallway, Sasha sighed before looking over at Skylar, who was flipping through a People Magazine.

“Thanks for coming with us, baby bro,” Sasha said.

“Yeah, I’m just here for the free meal at Wolfie's that you're taking us all too afterward,” Skylar said with an amused smile while keeping his eyes on the magazine he was reading.

Sasha playfully hit him while laughing, resulting in him laughing too.

Scene Song: “You Know Me” ~ Biagio Lazaric

~ Later ~

It was two hours later when Jimmy finally walked out the door leading to the back hallway. Sasha was half asleep in the waiting room chair, head tipped back like she was fighting a nap with sheer will. Kellie wasn't doing much better—eyes heavy, arms folded. In the corner, Spike and Skylar were halfway through a loud game of Spades with Skylar's beat-up deck.

"Finally," Kellie said, pushing to her feet with a grin.

Jimmy crossed the waiting room with a brief, closed-mouth smile and tapped Sasha's shoulder. Sasha startled awake, then stood, stretching and yawning like a cat.

"Hey," she said, blinking at him. "How was it? Did they do some incredible work on you?"

Jimmy looked away and laughed—then looked back at her and smiled. Sasha gasped. His teeth were fixed. Straight. Bright. Pearly white **i**n a way that made his whole face look younger, softer—like somebody had turned the light on behind him.

"Jimmy!" Sasha exclaimed. "Your teeth look *so* much better. Your smile looks better than ever."

Jimmy laughed again, almost embarrassed by the praise.

"Aye. I'm surprised too," he said while shaking his head, still half in disbelief. "I'm not gonna lie—I didn't even know what the *fuck* was happenin' back there for the first thirty minutes."

He gestured vaguely, like the hallway had committed a crime.

"Then he gave me that…gas—had me feelin' like I was floatin' in space. Next thing I know, I wake up and I've got these pearly whites and a mouth full of…fillings and shite."

Kellie let out a breathy laugh, her eyes flicking over his grin.

"Huh. You look almost human now," she teased.

Spike lightly laughed and even Skylar laughed. Jimmy sighed loudly, took a step back, tilted his head, and stared at Kellie like he was appraising her from a throne.

"Ah, Kellie…" Jimmy said, with that calm, royal disappointment. "If you ever unclench for five bloody seconds, you might actually be pleasant."

Kellie gaped, eyes widening—then she burst into a shocked laugh.

"Damn," Skylar said with a half smile. "That was *fire*."

Jimmy laughed before he and Skylar exchanged a quick handshake that turned into a half-hug.

“Fuck you,” Kellie said while laughing lightly and flipping Jimmy the middle finger.

“Aye, love you too,” Jimmy shot back with a half smile, without missing a beat.

“All right, all right,” Sasha cut in, looping her arm through Jimmy’s and steering the whole chaos toward the exit. “Let’s all get something to eat over on the boardwalk.”

“Finally,” Spike said, grabbing the door. “Frank’s Pizzeria.”

“Oh pizza sounds *damn* good right about now,” Skylar agreed, following Spike and Kellie out.

Sasha moved to go after them—but Jimmy gently tugged her back.

“Sasha. Wait a second,” he said, his voice lower.

She paused, brows lifting.

“Sure—what’s up?”

Before she could say anything else, Jimmy pulled her into a snug, warm hug. It took Sasha off guard—just enough that she froze for half a beat before melting into it. When he let her go, she blinked at him.

“What was that for?”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched like he hated being sincere—but he did it anyway.

“It was to say thank you, again,” he said, quieter with a faint smile. “I can’t say enough how glad I am that you’re here.”

Sasha’s eyes widened in surprise.

“*Oh* see, now I’m going to be crying in a few minutes,” she said with a half smile.

Jimmy huffed a laugh, fond and exasperated.

“Yeah. Of *course* you are.”

Jimmy hooked his arm around her shoulders, pulled her close, and kissed the top of her head like it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he walked her out of the office and into the sun.

Scene Song: “Viva La Vida” ~ Coldplay

On a Saturday morning, Sasha woke up to the wrong kind of quiet, not the peaceful, velvety silence of Pelmont mornings—the kind that came with salt air and distant gulls and the soft hum of a realm that never knew hunger or rot. This was *indoor* quiet. The "someone is in my apartment and they're being way too comfortable about it" kind of quiet. Her eyes cracked open. Sunlight was spilling through the thin blinds in pale stripes, turning the dust motes into glitter. The studio felt the same as always—small, lived-in, warm—but something was *off*. A faint, tinny voice drifted from the television at the end of her bed. A theme. Drums. A dramatic Scottish narrator voice. Something about a quest. A challenge. Sasha blinked twice, still half-asleep, and then her gaze locked on the silhouette sitting on her sofa.

A man—no, *Jimmy*—was perched cross-legged like a kid at a sleepover, entirely unbothered by the laws of privacy and personal space. He wore a blue tracksuit with clean white stripes down the sleeves and legs, like he'd been teleported straight out of a 2000s sports catalog. His platinum hair was messy in that infuriating way where it looked accidental but still somehow…good. A bowl of cereal sat in his hands. He was shoveling spoonfuls into his mouth with the focused seriousness of someone watching the finale of a war documentary. On the TV: Raven. The old CBBC show with kids running around the Scottish Highlands doing fantasy obstacle challenges like it was life or death. Sasha pushed herself up onto her elbows, squinting.

"…Jimmy?"

He didn't turn; his blue eyes stayed glued to the screen, bright and narrowed like he was studying enemy movement.
"That wee lad's about to eat shite," Jimmy murmured, then took a massive bite of cereal like he was placing a bet on it.
Sasha sat up fully and stared at him—at the cereal bowl balanced like he'd been doing this his whole life, at the casual way he'd claimed her space like a cat.

"Baby bro," she said, voice still raspy with sleep, "why are you in my house?"

Jimmy lifted the spoon again, still not looking at her.

"I'm watching Raven."

"Yeah, I can see that," Sasha said as she rubbed her face, trying to force her brain online. "Why are you here, though? How did you get *in* here?"

Jimmy's jaw worked slowly as he chewed. He swallowed, frowned faintly at the screen as if Raven had personally offended him, and then finally spoke with that rough Scottish lilt—soft, gritty, and shameless.

"Found the key under the mat."

Sasha froze and she briefly gaped with a half smile.

"...*Excuse* me?"

He shrugged one shoulder with his eyes still forward.

“It was right there, under the mat, like you were invitin’ criminals in for fuckin’ tea.”

Sasha stared at the back of his head with a half smile that didn’t know whether to be charmed or horrified.

“I—Jimmy, that’s not—” she cut herself off, breathed in, and then exhaled slowly. “You broke into my apartment.”

“I did not break in,” he said with a frown, offended on principle. “I used the key. That’s the opposite of breaking in. That’s just…entering—efficiently.”

On the TV, a kid screamed and slipped off something that looked like a rope swing. Jimmy’s face lit up with unfiltered childish delight.

“*OHHH*!” Jimmy barked, and then laughed—low, breathy and almost boyish—before shoveling another spoonful into his mouth. “This show is fuckin’ *cool*!”

Sasha swung her legs off the bed and stood. She walked toward him and stopped beside the sofa. Up close, she could see the tiny details—the way his rings caught the morning light as his hand moved, the way his brow furrowed in concentration, the faint stubble shadowing his jaw. He looked…*younger* here, not physically though. No, physically, he was still the same grown man—but in the way his posture loosened when he forgot to perform, like the afterlife had given his nervous system permission to unclench. She folded her arms, looking down at him with a faint frown and a half smile.

“You’re eating cereal at…what time is it even?”

Jimmy glanced toward the window like the sun itself might answer, then shrugged before looking back at the TV.

“Morning time.”

Sasha let out a short laugh through her nose.

“You are unreal.”

“Aye,” he muttered, deadpan, “and yet here I am.”

Another pause. Then, he said softer—almost like he couldn’t help himself:
“It’s like…*Xena: Warrior Princess*, only Scottish and with children sufferin’ for entertainment.”

Sasha burst out laughing, her hand flying to her mouth. Jimmy finally turned his head just enough to flick her a look—a sideways glance with a faint scowl that wasn’t real irritation, more like pride disguised as annoyance.

“What?” he asked. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sasha said, still laughing, “you’re just—”

She waved a hand, searching for the word.

"You're *you.*"

He turned back to the TV like the conversation was complete. Sasha stood there for a second longer, watching him—watching how *invested* he was, how the eight-year-old version of him had broken through when the world was safe enough to allow it. It made something protective tighten in her chest. Shaking her head, Sasha smiled before entering the bathroom. The shower steamed up the tiny bathroom fast. Sasha stood under the warm water, letting it pound sleep out of her muscles while her brain tried to catch up with the reality that her manifested baby brother had apparently decided: *I live here now.* She washed her face and stood there for a moment with her hands braced against the tile, listening. Through the thin wall, she could hear the TV still going, the dramatic music, the shouting kids, the occasional low commentary from Jimmy that sounded like a sports announcer who also happened to be a menace.

"AYE, RUN THEN, YA IDIOT!" she heard Jimmy shout. "…Raven's ruthless, man."

Then after a few more seconds, she heard:

"*OHHH*! Look at that! That's brilliant!" Jimmy exclaimed before laughing like an enthused little boy.

Sasha laughed quietly to herself and after showering, she shut the water off. Still in the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, she got dressed in her usual comfortable day clothes. As she pulled on her shoes, she opened the bathroom door and stepped back into the main room. Jimmy was now sitting on the *arm* of the sofa instead of cross-legged, and balanced like he might leap into battle at any moment. The cereal bowl was empty but his attention was still locked on the television. Sasha folded her arms and nodded.

"All right," she said, "the barbecue is today."

Jimmy's eyes stayed on the TV.

"Aye."

"You're coming?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She waited, letting the silence do the work. Then she looked him up and down with a brow raised and a half smile.

"You're going…in *that*?"

Jimmy finally blinked like she'd asked him something genuinely confusing.

He looked down at his tracksuit, then back up at her with a brief frown.

"Yeah. Why not?"

Sasha pressed her lips together like she was trying not to laugh.
“Because you look like you’re about to go beat somebody up in a parking lot and then steal their lunch money.”

Jimmy scoffed, offended again on principle.

“No, I look fuckin’ *excellent*.”

“You look like a retro Adidas commercial.”

He pointed vaguely at the TV as if Raven himself would back him up.

“Raven would wear this.”
“Raven also wears eyeliner and talks to spirits.”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched into what was almost a smile, but he swallowed it like it was a weakness.

“Still iconic.”

Sasha grabbed his forearm with affectionate authority.

“Well, come on, Sir Lord, let’s go. I’m meeting Ian and Kellie, and we’re all heading over to the barbecue together.”

Jimmy stood when she pulled him, allowing it—but not without that habitual flicker of control in his posture, like he wanted the world to remember he was choosing compliance, not being dragged. He nodded once, sharp and final.

“Fine.”

Sasha grabbed her keys and opened the door. Jimmy stepped outside first, like he was checking for threats, then paused and looked back at her with a faint scowl.

“We really are meeting them?”

Sasha blinked.

“Yes?”

He stared for a beat too long, that old haunted intensity hovering for half a second before it softened into something else—something almost…boyish, but guarded.

“Good,” he responded with a faint smile. “I want it to be normal today.”

Sasha’s chest tightened again. She covered it with a smile and a playful tug on his arm.

“It will be.”

Jimmy huffed as if that was naïve, then followed her out anyway.

Scene Song: "Astronaut In The Ocean" ~ Masked Wolf

Outside, the Pelmont air was bright and gentle, the sun warm without being harsh. Sasha's Lincoln Navigator sat where she'd left it, gleaming like a promise. She hit the unlock button and the mirrors unfolded with a soft mechanical sigh. Jimmy climbed into the passenger seat like it belonged to him, already settling in with that lazy confidence he wore like armor. He leaned back, his gaze scanning the street. Sasha slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and pulled out. As they drove away, Jimmy stared out the window for a moment, jaw working like he was chewing on a thought. Then he spoke, quiet but blunt, like he couldn't help it.

"If Kellie says any shite today, I'm not responsible for going off on her."

Sasha glanced at him.

"Jimmy."
"What?" he said quickly, defensive. "I'm just saying. She's got a mouth on her."

"So do you."

He shrugged, unbothered.

"But mine's charming."

Sasha laughed, shaking her head as she drove down the street.

Sasha's Lincoln Navigator rolled up to the curb in front of Ian's place—clean lines, neat porch, the kind of calm that felt *manufactured* in Pelmont. Like the universe itself had decided this corner of Pelmont deserved gentle mornings and nothing sharp. The engine purred low. The sunroof was cracked just enough to let in the warm breeze. Jimmy sat in the passenger seat with one knee angled up, still wearing that blue tracksuit like it was a formal suit of armor, along with his diamond-encrusted tiara on his head and his numerous rings, which caught the light every time he flexed his fingers.

He looked calm on the outside. Inside, Sasha could practically hear him bristling. She hadn't even killed the engine before the front door opened. Ian stepped out first. Dr. Ian Kelson looked…*better* here. The same face, the same sharp mind behind his eyes, but without the exhaustion that had carved itself into him on Earth. He wore casual clothes like someone who'd finally remembered what they felt like. He smiled the moment he saw Sasha—warm, easy. Behind him came Kellie, hair pulled back, expression already set to "ready to start something." And then—*Samson*. He walked out as if he belonged to the morning.

Tall, broad, and steady, his long hair loose down his shoulders in a way that made him look more like the man on a movie poster than the ravaged nightmare Jimmy had remembered him

to be. He was still *Samson*—that presence, that weight—but the hunger was gone from his eyes. The second Jimmy saw him, his whole body reacted like a sprung trap. For a split second, Jimmy's mind supplied the smell of iron and old stone—his own blood rushing, the cross, the wind—before the clean Pelmont air forced it away. Jimmy slid across the leather seat so fast Sasha's shoulder got bumped, his back pressed into her space, and his eyes fixed on Samson like he was lining up a target. Outside, Ian leaned toward the open window, smiling.

"Morning," he said. "You're fifteen minutes early."

Sasha smiled.

"I know. It's a character flaw. I'm working on it."

Kellie laughed, peering in.

"You look entirely too awake for someone who voluntarily shows up early."

Then Samson stepped closer, his posture relaxed, his voice calm—almost gentle.

"Good morning," Samson said, looking from Sasha to Jimmy, "both of you."

Jimmy didn't answer. His gaze stayed locked on the mirror. His jaw tensed so hard a vein ticked once near his temple. Sasha turned, her half smile fading when Jimmy grabbed her hand and squeezed so hard her knuckles went red.

"Jimmy, what's *wrong*? What's up with you?"

Jimmy spoke without looking at her, his voice low and tight, like he was trying not to be heard by the world.

"That's the alpha, Sasha, he's one of the infected."

Kellie's eyes widened a fraction—then she burst out laughing, loud enough to bounce off the inside of the SUV. Jimmy's stare snapped to her, instant ice.

"What the fuck are *you* laughing at, Kellie?" Jimmy asked, his voice calm in that dangerous way—smooth, controlled, the tone that always came right before a line got crossed. "Did you see your reflection in the window and it finally caught up with reality?"

Kellie made a choking sound, half laugh and half gasp, then leaned in closer with a grin that was pure attitude.

"Oh, wow," Kellie said, "he's early *and* bitchy. Sasha, did you feed him after midnight? Because I think your little gremlin is malfunctioning."

"Say that shite again," Jimmy said, "and I'll fuckin' *show* you a malfunction."

"Jimmy," Sasha warned while touching his arm.

Jimmy yanked his arm away from her while sucking his teeth with anger. Ian chuckled under his breath, sliding into the back seat behind Sasha like he'd done it a thousand times. Kellie climbed in beside him with a huff, still smirking. Samson got in last, folding his long frame into the seat with careful ease. Jimmy's shoulders went rigid as soon as the door shut. Jimmy stared at his side mirror, like he expected Samson's eyes to go black and his jaw to split open any second.

"That's him," Jimmy repeated, quieter now, like he needed to convince himself he wasn't imagining it, "that's the alpha, the same one I saw when I was—up on the cross. The same one I saw after I went to talk to Ian at the temple."

Kellie wiped at the corner of her eye like she was laughing so hard she'd almost cried.

"Oh my God," Kellie said, "he's traumatized and he's trying to act tough. This is adorable."

"Kellie, you're not helping, *stop*," Sasha said in a serious, defensive tone that sounded like a sister who was being overprotective of her baby brother.

Jimmy's head turned slowly toward Kellie. It wasn't a glare; it was *worse*, a still, unblinking stare full of promise.

"Keep talking, Kellie," Jimmy said in a cold tone. "I'm sure it'll fix your fuckin' personality eventually."

Ian leaned forward slightly between them.

"Jimmy. Relax," Ian said in a tone that was easy but firm.

Samson's voice came next—low, steady, unthreatening.

"He's right," Samson said, "you can relax, man."

Jimmy made a short sound, halfway between a scoff and a breath as he finally turned his head just enough for Samson to see his profile.

"Well, forgive me if I'm not exactly…comforted by your fuckin'—*good morning*."

Samson nodded once, accepting it like he'd earned the distrust.

"Ian cured me," Samson said simply. "I'm not an alpha anymore."

That landed hard. Jimmy's brow lifted. His frown deepened. Confusion flickered over his face like a crack of light. Jimmy looked through the mirror at Ian as if he was trying to decide whether this was a joke.

"You—" Jimmy started, then paused, swallowing. "You really cured him?"

Ian gave a small shrug, like he was talking about fixing a broken watch instead of the impossible.

“I did,” Ian replied, “and if we’d stayed on Earth long enough…I truly believe I could’ve cured them all the same way.”

The car went quiet for half a beat, even Kellie shut up—only for a second. Jimmy blinked, the tension in his shoulders loosening by a fraction. He nodded slowly, processing it in layers, like his brain didn’t want to trust relief. Then a rough laugh slipped out of him—half disbelief, half gratitude, half leftover fear.

“Well, that’s a fuckin’ relief,” Jimmy said, exhaling hard as he leaned back into his seat again—still not all the way, still guarded. “Because I was sweating seeing him walk up to the car.”

Samson let out a quiet laugh.

“Well, you can relax,” Samson repeated before giving a dry glance at Ian, “I’ll only go back to being an alpha if someone tries to hurt Ian.”

Ian smiled. Kellie snickered. Samson continued, dead serious in tone—until the punchline hit.

“…Or if I find out there’s no potato salad at the barbecue,” Samson added.

Sasha laughed out loud, shaking her head as she started the engine. Ian laughed too, genuine and bright, and even Kellie’s laugh softened into something almost normal. Jimmy didn’t laugh, not really. Jimmy just gave a contrived little smile, the kind he used when he wanted to participate but couldn’t fully unclench. He nodded once, like the joke was acceptable, then turned forward again. However, his eyes stayed a touch too alert. His hands flexed once on his thigh. He was *trying*, and Sasha could feel it—he *wanted* to be okay with this. He wanted to stay the redeemed version of himself, the one who could sit in a car with the ghost of his worst memory and not spiral.

Still…He wasn’t there yet. Sasha reached over without making it a big thing. She took his hand—warm, steady—and squeezed once. A silent, simple message: *You’re safe. I’m here. I’ve got you, baby bro.* Jimmy’s head turned slightly toward her. His eyes flicked down to their hands, then up to her face. For a moment, something softened—something small, young and grateful. He gave her the faintest smile. Then he looked forward again, breathing a little more evenly as Sasha pulled away from the curb and drove them toward the barbecue.

Chapter 4

Scene Song: "Block Party" ~ Chuck Brown

Pelmont Park was alive—not alive the way the wasteland had ever been, with desperate breathing, distant screams, and rot hanging in the air like a curse. This was alive the way a real summer afternoon was supposed to be: loud, bright, crowded, musical, and gloriously careless. The sky overhead was a flawless, cloudless blue. The sun sat high and warm, bathing the park in a gold glare that made the pavement shimmer and the chrome on parked cars flash. It was seventy-five degrees of perfect heat, the kind that kissed the skin instead of punishing it.

A DJ booth had been set up near the center plaza, speakers stacked high, bass thumping deep enough to rattle folding chairs and shake laughter loose out of people. And right then, the whole park was riding the groove of Chuck Brown's "Block Party." The song didn't just play—it *moved* through the air, all bounce and rhythm and go-go swagger, the kind of beat that made shoulders loosen and feet start doing things before the mind even agreed to it. Near the middle of the tables and chairs, a huge dance floor had practically taken over its own section of the park.

It was packed. Black folks, Latino folks, Mexican folks—families, couples, aunties, uncles, cousins, friends—all moving together in easy, practiced rhythm, laughing loud, clapping, hyping each other up whenever somebody hit a spin too clean or dropped low with unnecessary confidence. A few men at the edge of the dance floor shouted encouragement like they were witnessing a championship event. Women laughed, their earrings flashing in the sun.

Every few seconds, another wave of cheers rose from the floor. Elsewhere in the park, life was spilling over itself. Kids sprinted past picnic tables, trailing laughter behind them like streamers. Little girls in bright braids and ribbons skipped in clusters. Boys chased each other with basketballs under one arm and chips in the other. At one table, a Spades game was in full war—cards slapping down hard, beer bottles clinking, somebody cussing with the full conviction of a man ready to disown his cousin over a bad bid. At another, older men smoked and argued over football like the season was starting in ten minutes, and the fate of civilization depended on their opinions. Near the basketball court, a group of guys shouted over a close game, sneakers squeaking, the ball cracking off asphalt before a clean swish made the whole court erupt. And over all of it floated the smell—charcoal smoke, grilled meat, sweet sauce, beer, buttery corn, fried food, seasoned greens, warm bread, and sugar caramelizing somewhere in the distance. It rolled across the park in thick, mouthwatering waves like the whole afternoon had been cooked up on purpose. When Sasha's Navigator rolled into the lot, the reunion opened up in front of them like a celebration of existence itself.

Samson stepped out first and immediately started moving to the beat, shoulders loose, grin easy, like the music had spotted him from across the park and called him by name. Jimmy got out second, and his tiara caught the sun, his rings flashed, and for a moment—just a moment—he said absolutely nothing. He just stood there watching, taking it in. The tables were packed with Black families laughing over paper plates and red cups. Latino and Mexican families leaning into each other in conversation, food spread everywhere, music threading through all of it. The beer, the cards, the dancing, the loud talk, the easy shouting across distances that didn't need shouting. The old men smoking. The women were dressed cute and cool and entirely unbothered. The kids, moving as if joy itself had put on sneakers. And Jimmy, for maybe the first time in his life, looked genuinely speechless. Because this—this was *new*.

This was the first majorly Black anything Jimmy had ever been part of, let alone a majorly Black barbecue. The only barbecue he had ever attended with his parents had been when he was six years old, and he barely remembered it beyond vague sunlight and somebody handing him something sticky off a paper plate. It sure as hell hadn't looked like *this*, not like this music, not like this rhythm, not like these card games played with the seriousness of blood feuds and the comedy of theater. Not like people dancing in ways he had never seen in all of Scotland. Not like beer bottles being passed around between laughter, side-eyes, and shouted jokes. Not like all this loud, warm, cultural electricity rolling through the park like it had every right to be there. It hit him all at once—half culture shock, half fascination. Then a faint frown touched Jimmy's face, paired with the smallest half-smile, amused and thrown off in equal measure.

Because the whole thing felt so unfamiliar, so alive, so unapologetically itself, that for a second his brain didn't know whether to judge it, admire it, or just stand there and let it happen to him. And maybe, secretly, it was already doing all three. Then he caught sight of Samson smiling nearby, moving to the music like a man with no ghosts left in him, and the frown deepened a little. Because no matter how many times Jimmy saw Samson healed, whole, and unmistakably himself, there was still some old, buried part of Jimmy's body that whispered: *That's the alpha. That's the one that looked at you like meat.* Samson, completely unaware or maybe fully aware and deciding to be kind about it, pointed toward the DJ booth like he was saluting the music itself. Samson pointed toward the DJ booth like he was saluting the music itself. Jimmy kept staring out across the park for another beat, then let out a short, disbelieving laugh through his nose.

"What in the fuck is all this?" Jimmy murmured.

"A barbecue?" Sasha responded while glancing at him, already smiling.

"No, no," Jimmy said, waving a ringed hand toward the whole park like the answer was obviously insufficient. "I know it's a barbecue. I mean *this*."

He pointed again, this time toward the dance floor where a woman had just spun out of her partner's arms and landed the beat so clean that three people near the speakers shouted in approval. "This is not the kind of barbecue I remember my family ever having."

Kellie came around the side of the car and followed his gaze with a grin.

“What kind do you remember?” Kellie asked.

Jimmy frowned thoughtfully.

“Smaller. Whiter. Much sadder,” he responded as he stared at the packed dance floor. “This feels less like a barbecue and more like somebody turned joy and happiness into a public event.”

That made Sasha laugh.

Jimmy kept watching, fascinated in spite of himself.

“And why is everybody so good at everything?” Jimmy asked. “The dancing, the cards, the loud talk, the grill work—everybody here moves like they know exactly what they’re doin’. It’s fuckin’ unsettling.”

Ian smiled as he came up beside them.

“That’s called culture, Jimmy,” Ian responded.

Jimmy cut his eyes at him.

“Aye, well, it’s aggressive,” Jimmy replied.

Samson barked a laugh. Jimmy pointed toward one of the card tables where somebody had just slapped a card down hard enough to make the whole table erupt.

“And those men over there,” Jimmy said, “they look like they’re two bad plays away from legally disowning each other.”

“Ah, yup, that’s because they’re playing Spades,” Sasha said with an amused smile.

“That game looks personal,” Jimmy replied as he stared for another second.

“It probably is,” Kellie said.

Jimmy looked back to the dance floor, where the song kept rolling through the park, bright and impossible not to move to.

“I’m not gonna lie though,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half-smile like he still couldn’t believe what he was seeing, “this is some electric shite.”

Sasha and Samson laughed.

“A’right well,” Samson said, his voice rich and pleased, “the music’s good, the vibe is right and so—”

He stopped mid-sentence, and his head turned. His eyes locked onto the long food table like it was a holy altar. There it was. A big bowl of potato salad sitting proud among trays of ribs,

chicken, corn on the cob, macaroni, greens, and foil pans of food being guarded like treasure. Samson's smile widened like a kid spotting their favorite candy.

"And they've got potato salad," he announced, like it was the most important discovery in Pelmont history.

Samson turned his head toward Ian with absolute urgency.

"Ian—come on. Let's get a plate."

Ian chuckled, shaking his head as he followed.

"Hopefully it tastes better than when I try to cook it."

Samson barked a laugh, already walking faster.

"Yeah," Samson said, amused, "because your potato salad tastes like you made it out of *science*."

Ian laughed under his breath, and the two of them broke away toward the table, Samson still subtly dancing as he walked like the beat was stitched into his bones. Kellie didn't even watch them. She'd already spotted Spike and his mom at a table and was making a beeline over there with the posture of someone about to talk shit lovingly but aggressively. Sasha watched her go and sighed like she'd lived this dynamic a hundred times. Jimmy, however, stayed still.

His eyes remained fixed on Samson—on his relaxed body language, the way he moved through people without predatory tension, the way he smiled like the world had never once tried to eat him alive. Jimmy's frown deepened just slightly. He looked…conflicted, like his brain didn't know which memory to trust. Sasha saw it. She laughed softly and stepped closer, wrapping her arm around his shoulder and tugging him into her side like he was a stubborn little brother she could physically anchor.

"Relax," she murmured, warm and steady. "You're in safe company."

Jimmy finally tore his gaze away from Samson and looked at her with a faint frown and a half smile—half amused, half still on edge.

"Yeah," he muttered, that Scottish lilt rougher than usual, "that's hard for me to believe when there's a six-foot-eight fuckin' former infected alpha walking around here like he's at a family reunion."

Sasha laughed out loud, shaking her head as she started steering him toward the food table.

"Jimmy…"

"I'm just saying," he added, defensive on principle. "It's…fuckin' unsettling."

"*You're* unsettled," she teased, squeezing his shoulder, "because he's dancing."

Jimmy's mouth twitched.

"Aye, well, he shouldn't be that coordinated. It's fuckin' sinister," Jimmy replied.

As they walked, people - a huge majority of them being black---turned, not in fear, not in suspicion but in curiosity. Because it was hard not to notice the white young guy in a blue tracksuit wearing a crown like it was completely normal. Jimmy caught a few looks and lifted his chin slightly, letting the crown glint like a warning. In his mind, he was thinking: *yes. I know you're looking. Mind your fuckin' business.* Sasha leaned closer to him, smiling.

"Come on, food first. Then you can stand around looking like the King of Trauma and Judgment Day."

Jimmy glanced down at her with a deadpan stare.

"I am not the fuckin' king of—"

Sasha cut him off with a laugh, tugging him along. They reached the long table, and Jimmy stared at a huge bowl of potato salad as if it were suspicious.

"Don't worry. It's not infected," Sasha leaned in and whispered with an amused smile.

Jimmy shot her a look—then, despite himself, a reluctant little smile tugged at his mouth.

"…Funny," he muttered.

But he stayed close to her anyway.

<u>Scene Song: "Let's Get Down" ~ Tony Toni Tone</u>

As the DJ changed the song to "Let's Get Down" by Tony Toni Tone, the entire park seemed to sway in unison. Sasha stood at the long folding table lined with aluminum trays and plastic serving spoons, carefully building her plate. Jimmy stood beside her, plate in hand, staring hard. His faint frown deepened as his blue eyes moved from dish to dish like he was scanning artifacts in a museum: cornbread, collard greens.
barbeque chicken, banana pudding, okra, baked macaroni and cheese, candied yams. He leaned slightly toward the collard greens, squinting.

"What's wrong?" Sasha asked, already knowing the answer.

Jimmy didn't look at her.

"Besides the chicken," he muttered in his thick Scottish lilt, "I've no idea what the fuck any of this is."

Sasha burst out laughing.

“That’s,” she said, pointing with the spoon, “baked mac and cheese, that’s okra, and that’s candied yams, and over there? That’s banana pudding.”

Jimmy’s brow lifted.

“That explained absolutely nothing.”

She shook her head, smiling, and without asking, scooped macaroni, okra, and candied yams onto his plate. He stared down at it like it had personally offended him.

“I really hope this shite is good,” Jimmy said with a straight face and seriousness, "because if it’s not, I’m never letting you drag me to another barbecue again.”

Sasha laughed, grabbing her plate.

“Drama king.”

“Sir Lord,” he corrected automatically.

They made their way to a long table beneath a shade canopy where several people were already seated: D.L. Hughley, Bernie Mac, Sasha’s mother, Jackie, Sasha’s aunt Deborah, and D.L.’s friends, Dave and Sally. The laughter at the table quieted just slightly as Sasha and Jimmy approached. Jimmy slowed half a step; it was subtle, but it was there. For all his swagger, his tiara gleaming in the sunlight and his rings flashing, he suddenly felt very aware that he was the only white Scottish man at a Black barbecue table. He followed Sasha’s lead and sat beside her.

“Girl, we were wondering when you were gonna get here,” Jackie said with a warm smile.

“I had to pick up Ian, Samson, and Kellie on the way,” Sasha said before taking a bite of her mac and cheese.

Jimmy barely heard it. He was carefully dragging his fork through the okra, lifting some of it slightly, examining them like they might move. Jimmy didn’t realize every single person at the table was watching him. D.L. leaned forward, squinting at him dramatically.

“And what’s your name there, fella?” D.L. asked in that classic Hughley rhythm.

Bernie and Deborah already started laughing.

“Cinderella?” D.L. Hughley added before laughing with Dave and Sally.

Deborah nearly choked laughing. Jimmy looked up slowly and contrived a little laugh. Then he leaned back in his chair, draping his arm casually across it, his tiara catching the sun just right, that signature cool, charismatic smile sliding into place.

“I’m Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal,” Jimmy said smoothly, “the kind of man with the confidence Cinderella should’ve had.”

Jimmy glanced at D.L. up and down.

“Probably you too for that fuckin’ matter,” Jimmy added.

Sasha burst out laughing. Even Jimmy cracked a brief grin at himself. Deborah leaned forward with an amused smile, her eyes sparkling.

“Now wait, are you serious about that whole Sir Lord thing, or is it just Jimmy?”

Jimmy nodded solemnly.

“Technically, yeah, it’s Sir Lord Jimmy.”

Then he softened, shrugging.

“But no, you’re good, Jimmy’s fine.”

Sasha smiled warmly.

“He’s my friend. And my brother,” Sasha said.

Jackie opened her mouth, and Sasha shot her a look, resulting in Jackie laughing lightly and shaking her head. Bernie leaned in, eyeing the tiara.

“Okay, young blood,” Bernie said. “What’s with the tiara and the rings?”

Jimmy scraped his fork lazily through the okra while shrugging.

“Because I think it’s fuckin’ cool.”

Sasha lightly laughed. Before anyone could add commentary, Jimmy suddenly stabbed his fork down into the candied yams, hard, like he was planting a flag on newly conquered land. The metal tines hit the paper plate with a sharp little *thwack*—and he immediately let out a quick, breathy, boyish laugh, a real one, not the controlled, charismatic Sir Lord chuckle, a small, reckless, *“hehe!”* that slipped out of him before he could stop it, like he’d just poked something he wasn’t supposed to. For half a second, he looked less like a crowned warlord and more like an eight-year-old who’d just discovered he was allowed to be loud at the table. He scooped up an exaggerated mound of candied yams, still smiling faintly to himself, and shoved the forkful into his mouth. Then, after two seconds—maybe three—his eyes widened, and he froze.

“Ooh! These are fuckin’ *good*!”

The table went silent for half a beat as Deborah blinked, Jackie blinked, and Dave and Sally blinked. D.L. leaned back slowly.

“That reaction,” D.L. said with a smile, “sounds like a man who has *never* had Black cooking before! Let alone candied yams!”

Bernie, Jackie, Dave, Sally, Deborah, and D.L. laughed. Then, Jimmy swallowed and laughed lightly.

“No, I had no clue what the fuck this was,” Jimmy said, scooping another bite. “I thought it was that tubby custard shite the Teletummies eat.”

Deborah raised a brow while staring at Jimmy with a faint frown of confusion.

“Teletummies?” Deborah asked. “What—”

“Where you from, man?” Bernie interrupted with an amused smile.

“Scotland,” Jimmy said before shoving another forkful of candied yams into his mouth.

“That explains everything,” Bernie said with an amused smile while nodding.

Jimmy smiled.

“Aye. Land of rain, sheep, and generational trauma, *very* festive,” Jimmy joked before laughing lightly.

Bernie barked out a laugh. Dave leaned forward.

“So Scotland?” Dave said in a curious tone. “You guys got barbecues over there? Or is it just…boiled sadness?”

“Dave!” Sally said in a low voice while elbowing him lightly, resulting in Dave lightly snickering.

Jimmy looked up and blinked at Dave with a serious expression.

“We barbecue,” Jimmy said defensively. “It’s just usually raining while we do it.”

“So what do you think of the food now that you’ve had more than one bite?” Sally asked with a bright smile.

Jimmy glanced down at his now-empty yam section.

“I think whoever made those yams deserves a fuckin’ medal because they’re fuckin’ knockout.”

Deborah raised a brow.

“That was me.”

Jimmy looked up immediately and nodded with a smile.

“Well then, you’re beautiful *and* can cook? That’s fuckin’ stellar.”

Sasha smacked his arm lightly.

“*Jimmy*!”

“What?” Jimmy replied, smiling, “she is.”

Deborah laughed with a slight shake of her head and took a sip of her drink. Jimmy moved to his barbecue wings, took a bite out of one of them, with sauce smeared across his fingers, and he froze again, then leaned back slowly.

"…Holy *shite*."

He looked at the wings like it had changed his life.

"This is so good, it's fuckin' criminal."

Dave leaned back dramatically.

"Well, if you're enjoying it like that, man, I'm gonna need you over at my house next week just so I can feel good about my grill."

Sally nodded.

"That would require you to fix something that's actually edible, honey," Sally joked before she, D.L., Bernie, and Deborah laughed.

"Hey, my food tastes better than that slop your mother fixes for us every Thanksgiving," Dave said with a smile, resulting in D.L. laughing. "All her food should come with warning labels on them."

As Dave and D.L. laughed, Sally lightly hit Dave's arm with a smile. It was a joke that even made Jimmy laugh easily and briefly. Right then, the DJ switched tracks to the song "The Booty Call" by Blackstreet.

"Ohhh that's my song!" Deborah exclaimed with a smile while shooting up to her feet.

Bernie stood too, laughing loudly.

"Aww yeah! Come on, ya'll! Y'all better get on this dance floor!"

Dave turned to Sally.

"Come on, honey," Dave said, "let's show them how to cut it up on the dance floor."

Sally laughed. Within seconds, the table emptied, except Jimmy, who was still eating, completely locked in. Sasha grabbed his arm.

"Come on, Jimmy," Sasha said.

Jimmy shook his head, mouth half full.

"Nope," he replied. "I don't dance to…whatever the fuck—*this* music is."

She laughed and yanked him up anyway. He sucked his teeth loudly, stepping away briefly to lick sauce off his fingers before wiping them carefully.

"Sasha, I don't know how to do some fuckin'—line dancing shite."

Sasha dragged him toward the line forming.

“Just watch.”

He stood at the back with a deep frown and his arms crossed, watching. Step right, step left, turn, slide. He sighed dramatically. Then—tentatively—moved his foot, then again. Within thirty seconds—he had it. Within a minute—he added flair and a little shoulder bounce and a sharp head tilt and an extra hip snap. Bernie noticed first.

“Uh Oh!” Bernie shouted. “The Scottish boy back there got it *down*!”

Sasha, Deborah, and Sally laughed. Jimmy tried not to smile, but he failed, because he did, a faint but genuine one. And for the first time that day—he wasn’t guarded, he wasn’t calculating. He was just a redeemed Scottish guy doing a line dance at a Black family barbeque—and absolutely killing it.

Scene Song: “Fade” ~ Kanye West

About an hour later, Pelmont Park had settled into that loose, sun-dazed lull that came after good food, dancing, and enough laughter to soften people around the edges. Folks drifted between tables and lawn chairs with drinks in hand, still riding the music even when they weren’t on the dance floor. Grill smoke hung low and sweet over the grass. Jimmy stood at the drink cooler table, refilling his cup that already had quite a bit of alcohol in it with punch like it was a sacred responsibility.

He’d already eaten enough to drop a grown man into a coma, but he still moved with that faint, boyish disbelief he sometimes got around good things—as if the world kept handing them to him and he still didn’t fully trust they were real. So he took them in pieces. One plate. One laugh. One careful sip at a time. He twisted the cap back onto the jug, lifted his cup, took a drink—and felt a stare before he saw it. Jimmy looked up. A man stood a few feet away, frozen mid-step like his body had briefly forgotten what to do with itself. Tight jaw. Stunned eyes. That particular kind of shock that didn’t even try to hide. Jimmy blinked once, slowly. Then his mouth curved—half amused, half offended, Sir Lord default.

“You plannin’ on blinkin’, or is this your hobby?” Jimmy said, lifting his cup slightly like a toast.

The man’s lips parted. His accent came crisp and British, and his eyes moved over Jimmy’s face like he was trying to find the trick in it.

“You’re—” he started, voice catching for half a second. “You’re *him*.”

Jimmy glanced lazily to one side as if he expected another guy in a tiara to be standing behind him. Then he looked back at the man.

“Congrats,” Jimmy said dryly. “You’ve got fuckin’ eyes.”

The man stepped closer, still studying him too hard. He tried to pull his face into something tougher, more casual, but the astonishment kept leaking through it.

“How are you here?” the man asked, “that’s not possible.”

Jimmy took another sip of punch.

“And yet,” Jimmy said, “here I am.”

The man exhaled through his nose, jaw tightening.

“I played you,” the man said finally. “In the film.”

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed just a fraction. Then recognition clicked fully into place, and his expression changed—not rage, not surprise, just a cold, quiet sharpening. Like he’d just found the source of an old irritation.

“Aye,” Jimmy responded. “Okay, yeah, you’re that British lad.”

The man slightly tilted his head.

“Jack,” the man said, “Jack O’Connell.”

Jimmy nodded once.

“I know who you are,” Jimmy said. “You wore my face for the whole fuckin’ world to stare at.”

Jack’s mouth twitched, almost defensive.

“It was a performance,” Jack responded, “a character.”

Jimmy set his cup down slowly on the cooler table. The plastic clicked. Then, instead of snapping, he did something somehow worse--he got quiet.

“Can I ask you somethin’, *Jack*?” Jimmy asked after several seconds of silence.

Jack’s brows lifted, guarded already.

“Sure.”

Jimmy held his gaze, steady and unblinking.

“Why were you so quick to write me off?”
Jack frowned faintly. Jimmy went on.

“You of all people,” Jimmy said, his voice calm but heavy, “had the chance to sit inside my head for a little while, walk in my shoes, wear the fuckin’ weight of it. And you came out the other side sayin’ that I was a sociopathic and insane as if that was the full story.”

Jack shifted his weight. Jimmy tilted his head, studying him.

“You saw the tiara,” Jimmy continued, “you saw the blood, the theater, the violence—but did you see the boy under it? Or did the labels of insane and sociopath make for better fuckin’ press?”

Jack’s face tightened. He gave a short breath through his nose and folded one arm across himself, defensive without wanting to look it.

“I said what I said because of what you *did*,” Jack replied. “What people *saw*, the violence, the control, all of it. People need language for that.”

“Language,” Jimmy repeated softly with a slight tilt of his head and a nod. “Aye.”

Jack kept going, as if, if he talked fast enough, he could make the ground steady again.

“And I never said that was *all* of you.”

“Didn’t you?” Jimmy asked, his brows moving a fraction, "and by the way, that beady eyed fuckin' dude---Alex--whatever the fuck his name is and the four eyed guy with him connecting me with fuckin' Jimmy Savile because of my chains, tracksuits and rings?

Jimmy didn't shout. He didn't even raise his voice. He just took a slow, deliberate sip of his drink, his eyes never leaving Jack’s. When he spoke again, his voice was a low, smooth purr, vibrating with a cold sort of mockery.

“Are you lot actually mental, or just fuckin' lazy?” Jimmy asked softly. “Savile? Jimmy fuckin' Savile? That grey, crusty old nonce? I was born in ’94, Jack. Do the fuckin' math. By the time I could even crawl, that fossil was a ghost. You think I sat there in the Highlands takin’ notes from a man who looked like a fuckin' melted candle in a shell suit?”

Jimmy tilted his head, a ghost of a smirk playing on his lips, but his eyes remained sharp as glass.

“And here’s the fuckin' funny part,” Jimmy continued, his voice dropping an octave, sounding almost intimate, “Savile was a Christian. A proper, public fuckin', 'God-fearing' man of the cloth, wasn't he? Always playin' that holy angle for the goddamn cameras. Now, you’ve walked in my shoes, Jack. You’ve been inside my fuckin' head. Do I look like the kind of man who takes fashion tips from a servant of a cunt like God who I’ve got zero fuckin’ respect for?”

Jimmy leaned in, the gold around his neck catching the light, his movements fluid and predatory.

“The idea that I’d model my whole fuckin’ life after a man who played off that Christian shite...it’s fuckin' insultin’. It’s a reach for people who don’t have the fuckin' imagination to see what’s actually in front of them.”

Jack pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek while faintly smiling and slightly shaking his head.

"Yeah, what the fuck ever," Jack replied, "okay, then where the fuck did you get the idea for all the flashy shit then, huh---"

"It wasn't from lookin' at some dyin' British TV host fuckin' dickhead, Jack," Jimmy interrupted, his voice strong and icy. "Ever fuckin' heard of MTV Europe? I was lookin' at the fuckin' *kings* on MTV Europe---Beastie Boys, Run-D.M.C. LL Cool J., men who looked like they owned the fuckin' *air* they breathed. They had the tracksuits, they had the gold, and they had the swagger of actual fuckin' gods—not the one in your goddamn books, but the ones you can actually fuckin' see. *That's* where the rings, the tracksuits, and the chains came from. That's where the fuckin' *power* came from."

Jimmy pulled back and faintly displayed his signature, charming Sir Lord Jimmy smile. Jack stared at Jimmy with a brow raised, silently thinking and wondering if what Jimmy had said made sense, and honestly, Jack was starting to think that it actually did.

"So, you tell *that* to that Alex prick and his four-eyed mate. *I* built this. I didn't fuckin' copy it from a man who spent his Sundays attendin' mass and prayin' to a fuckin' cunt like God. And also---yeah, you did fuckin' say that that was *all* of me."

Jack shook his head with a faint frown.

"No, I didn't," Jack responded.

Jimmy didn't answer. Jack glanced away once, then looked back at Jimmy.

"Because I *also* said that you were an abused kid," Jack said, "a stunted one, a man still playing pretend because he never got the chance to be anything else."

That landed. Jimmy's face didn't soften, exactly, but the blade in it shifted. Jack went on, slower this time. Less press-ready. More honest.

"I said when you look at him like that," Jack said, "he becomes less threatening in a way. More—"

Jack stopped and briefly looked up at the sky as his mind searched for the word.

"Not sympathetic, exactly," Jack said, "but sad, *emotional*. You stop just seeing the menace."

Jimmy stared at him for a second. Then he picked up his cup again and took a slow drink, eyes fixed somewhere just past Jack's shoulder.

"Well," Jimmy said at last, "that's at least less fuckin' stupid."

Jack barked a quick laugh of slight surprise.

"Goddamn, that's about as nice as I'm gonna get from you, is it?" Jack asked with a faint smile.

Jimmy glanced at him sidelong.

“Don’t push your luck,” Jimmy replied.

The corner of Jack’s mouth lifted. Jimmy rolled the cup once between his palms, then looked back at him.

“I’m still fuckin’ annoyed,” Jimmy said, “for the record.”

“I gathered.”

“Good.” Jimmy took another sip, “because ‘sociopathic and insane’ is a hell of a thing to hear from the one bloke who literally wore my trauma to work.”

Jack winced faintly.

“Fair.”

Jimmy gave him a long look. Then, with that faint half-scowl that meant he was letting someone off the hook by inches and resenting himself for it, Jimmy muttered:

“At least you noticed I never grew up.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed slightly, not in suspicion but focus.

“How could I not?”

Jimmy let out a low huff through his nose.

“Aye. Well. Congratulations on your observational skills,” Jimmy replied.

Then Jimmy turned away, more or less ending the conversation in pure Sir Lord fashion, and took another drink. Jack stayed where he was and squinted and frowned a little at Jimmy’s platinum blond hair. Then, before good judgment could get involved, Jack reached out and gave one lock a testing little tug. Jimmy spun around so fast the liquid in his cup sloshed. He hit Jack with that full, signature Sir Lord Jimmy death stare—the one that made people feel like they’d just been selected for execution by a stylish tyrant.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?” Jimmy asked.

Jack immediately laughed and lifted both hands in surrender.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I just wanted to see if it was real.”

Jimmy kept staring as Jack, still half-laughing, nodded at Jimmy’s hair.

“In the film I had to wear a platinum-blond wig, so I just assumed that you—”

“*That*,” Jimmy said coldly, “was *you*, Jack, not *me*.”

Jack’s smile faded a little. Jimmy stepped closer—not threatening exactly, but close enough to make the point land properly.

“Everything *about* me is *real*,” Jimmy said. “My hair is *real*, the *scars* are real, the *trauma* is real, the pain of dying on that *cross* was real.”

The last line changed the air between them. Jack’s expression shifted. Jimmy’s mouth tightened. The sarcasm was gone now. So was the little bit of humor.

“All the *shite* that made me?” Jimmy said more quietly, “*that* was real too.”

For a second, neither of them said anything. Music carried over from the dance floor. Somebody shouted near the grill. Laughter rose and fell somewhere off to the left. But the space around them had gone still. Jack looked at him differently now, not shocked, not amused, just...*looking*. And Jimmy, apparently deciding he had already been more emotionally generous than the situation deserved, took one last drink.

“So kindly keep your hands *off* my fuckin’ hair,” Jimmy said with that dry, needling Sir Lord edge, just enough of it returning to save his pride, "that's your *first* and only warning."

Jack let out a breath that almost turned into another laugh, but didn’t quite.

“Right,” Jack said with a faint smile, “whatever, fair enough.”

Jimmy gave him one last look—cool, cutting, then he rolled his eyes and started to walk away. After three steps, he stopped without turning back.

“You did one thing right, though,” Jimmy said.

Jack blinked.

“What’s that?”

Jimmy’s profile tilted just enough for Jack to see the faint line of it.

“You noticed I was still just some abused kid playin’ pretend,” Jimmy responded. “That’s more than most people managed to see.”

Jack said nothing. Jimmy gave the slightest shrug.

“Doesn’t clear your record,” Jimmy added, “but it helps.”

And with that, Jimmy walked off toward the deeper heart of the barbecue, his tiara glinting in the afternoon light, leaving Jack standing there by the punch table with a strange look on his face—like he’d just been scolded, forgiven, and haunted all at once. Behind him, the music kept playing, and up ahead, Jimmy was already heading back toward the people who *actually* understood him now.

***

Jimmy came back toward Sasha's table with the same measured stride he always used when he was pretending nothing unusual had just happened, which, in itself, was suspicious. Sasha spotted him first. She was halfway through a cup of punch, leaning against the side of the table while Kellie stood nearby talking to Spike and Skylar, when she noticed the look on Jimmy's face—not angry exactly, not smug either, just... sharpened. Like he'd been irritated, then briefly sincere against his will, and was now trying to act like neither thing had occurred. Sasha lifted a brow.

"All right," Sasha said as he got close. "What was that about?"

Jimmy stopped, looked at her, and took a drink before answering.

"What was what about?" Jimmy responded.

Kellie turned immediately.

"Oh, don't do that," Kellie said with a faint smile, "that whole mysterious little talk over there with British You from Temu, what was it about?"

"Temu?" Jimmy asked as his face twisted faintly.

"You know what I mean," Kellie responded.

"I don't," Jimmy said flatly, "but I'm already offended."

Spike snorted. Skylar, catching the direction of the conversation, glanced past Jimmy and saw Jack still standing near the punch table, looking like his soul had been mildly rearranged.

"Ohhh," Skylar said, smiling, "you talked to the actor dude."

Jimmy gave him a slow look.

"Unfortunately," Jimmy responded.

"How did that go?" Sasha asked, her smile widening.

Jimmy rolled his eyes with the full weight of a man forced to recount nonsense.

"He stared at me like I'd risen from the fuckin' dead," Jimmy said, "which, to be fair, I suppose I sort of have."

"And?" Kellie asked as she folded her arms.

"And then," Jimmy went on, "we had a lovely little chat in which I informed him that if one is going to wear my face in public, the least one can do is not come out the other end callin' me a sociopathic madman like that's the whole fuckin' story."

Skylar and Spike heartily laughed.

"Oh shit, Jimmy, you didn't," Skylar said, smiling.

“I absolutely fuckin’ did,” Jimmy responded with a slight tilt of his head, a faint frown, and a brief half smile.

“Jimmy,” Sasha said, her eyes widening with amusement.

“What?” Jimmy said, lifting a shoulder. “It needed saying.”

Kellie was already laughing.

“What did he say?” Kellie asked.

Jimmy made a face.

“He tried to defend himself with fuckin’ actor logic.” Jimmy said before he took another sip of his drink, “very tragic, very fuckin' English.”

“That’s not actor logic, Jimmy,” Sasha said before laughing.

“It was something,” Jimmy replied. “A lot of words, some guilt, mildly acceptable eye contact.”

“Did you threaten him?” Spike asked with a faint smile.

Jimmy looked at Spike, offended.

“*No*—”

Then Jimmy paused.

“Not explicitly,” Jimmy added.

That sent Kellie and Skylar off again. Sasha shook her head, smiling.

“So how’d it end?” Sasha asked.

Jimmy’s expression shifted then, just slightly. Not enough to go soft, but enough that Sasha caught it. He looked off toward the punch table for half a second, then back.

“He said one intelligent thing,” Jimmy admitted grudgingly, “about me still being some abused kid playing pretend and never growing up.”

The group quieted a little. Kellie’s smile faded into something gentler, touched by a faint frown. Sasha watched Jimmy carefully.

“And?” Sasha said.

Jimmy looked down into his cup, swirled it once, then shrugged like he didn’t care nearly as much as he clearly did.

“And I told him that was less fuckin’ stupid than the other things he’s said.”

Spike let out a short laugh through his nose.

“That’s basically a compliment from you,” he said.

Jimmy scoffed with a faint, brief frown and a shake of his head.

“So you two made peace?” Skylar asked, still smiling.

Jimmy scoffed.

“Let’s not get theatrical,” Jimmy replied, frowning deeply at Skylar. “I didn’t stab him with a fuckin’ knife, and he stopped talking nonsense long enough to be tolerable. That’s the most progress anybody should expect. Although I should’ve stabbed him for fuckin’ pullin’ my hair.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Skylar laughed, and Spike folded over laughing. Sasha clapped a hand over her mouth. Kellie outright wheezed.

“Wait, he did *what?!*” Kellie asked, smiling.

Jimmy’s stare turned murderous on all of them.

“He fuckin' tugged at it,” Jimmy said with deep offense, touching one side of his hair as if the violation still lived there, “like some sort of nosy little fuckin’ goblin. Apparently, he wanted to know if it was real.”

"*Wow*, that's all I have to say to that," Kellie said before lightly laughing.

Jimmy nodded and then shook his head.

“Aye,” Jimmy responded, “Sasha, now I know why you said you and other Black women don’t want people touchin’ your hair, because that shite makes you instantly fuckin' homicidal.”

That did it; the whole group broke into laughter. Even Sasha had to set her cup down because she was laughing too hard to hold it steady. Jimmy stood there with a sour frown, waiting for the dignity to return to the moment and getting absolutely none of it back.

“Fuckin’ hell, you all are so goddamn immature,” Jimmy muttered with a slight shake of his head and a loud sigh before faintly smiling and taking another sip of his drink.

“Says the man in a tiara whose actor yanked his hair at a barbecue,” Kellie said before lightly laughing again.

Jimmy stared at her with cold precision.

“One more fuckin’ word out of you and I’ll start telling people you cried during the potato salad ceremony,” Jimmy said.

“What?! There *was* no potato salad ceremony, Jimmy,” Kellie said with an amused smile after laughing.

“There *should* have been a *full* fuckin’ ceremony,” Jimmy snapped. “Jackie’s potato salad deserved fuckin’ reverence.”

That sent them all off into laughter again. Sasha finally got herself together enough to step in close, still smiling, and touched his arm.

“Well,” she said warmly, “for what it’s worth, I’m glad you said something to him.”

Jimmy looked at her, the edge in his expression eased a little.

“Aye,” Jimmy replied, “me too.”

Then, because he was Jimmy and could not leave sincerity undisturbed for too long, he glanced back toward the punch table and added with a faint frown:

“But if he touches my hair again, I’ll fuckin’ remind him exactly why people used to be afraid of me.”

Kellie made another choking laugh, and Sasha, shaking her head with a helpless smile, looped her arm through Jimmy’s and pulled him into a light hug like the afternoon still had more life in it yet.

Scene Song: “Getting Jiggy With It” ~ Will Smith

Later, as the DJ let the beat of the song, “Getting Jiggy With It” by Will Smith dropped, the park shifted with it. The bass bounced across the court, across the picnic tables, across the folding chairs, coolers, and domino slams and card shuffles. The sun was still high, warm but not punishing. Jimmy had drifted away from the food tables and laughter without announcing it. He moved the way he always did when he didn’t want attention—slow and with his crown glinting under the sun like it belonged there. He stopped at the wire fence bordering the basketball court. About six guys—early thirties, same age range as him—were running full court, their sneakers squeaking, the ball thudding, and trash talk flying. Jimmy leaned back against the fence, crossing one ankle over the other, watching silently. He wasn’t smiling, he wasn’t scowling, he was studying. A guy with braids—Tyrique—caught the ball, faked left, passed right, then glanced toward the fence. His eyes landed on Jimmy.

“You hoop?” Tyrique called out.

Jimmy blinked once and then raised a brow.

“…Do I what?”

The other guys burst out laughing. Jimmy's jaw tightened instantly. Not rage—just that quick flash of insecurity that he covered with irritation.

"Don't give me shite about not knowing what it means," Jimmy snapped, pushing off the fence slightly, "just tell me what the fuck it means."

Tyrique held up a hand and grinned easily, and not in a mocking way.

"It means basketball, man. You play?"

Jimmy exhaled through his nose as his shoulders loosened half an inch.

"Never played," he admitted with a shrug, "but I know the game; it looks simple enough. Put the ball in the hoop, and don't be a fuckin' muppet about it."

The guys laughed again—this time *with* him, not at him.

"A'ight then," Tyrique said, nodding.

Tyrique bounced the ball once and fired it straight at Jimmy. Jimmy caught it clean, no bobble, no flinch, just instinct. Tyrique grinned.

"Okay. You in," Tyrique said.

Scene Song: "Just Like Music" ~ Eric Sermon ft. Marvin Gaye

Back at the card table, Sasha laid down her final card with calm precision. Bernie Mac stared at the spread. Then leaned back in exaggerated disbelief.

"OH COME ON, MAN!" Bernie barked, slapping the table. "This girl is *hustling* us. I know a damn professional shark when I *see* one!"

D.L. cackled. Dave threw his hands up.

"For real, she's cleaned us out for the third time!" Dave exclaimed with a brief, half smile.

Sasha leaned back in her chair, laughing.

"Hey, I told y'all not to bid recklessly," Sasha said with a faint smile.

Bernie pointed at her.

"Nah, go get a drink or something. *Go* before you take all our damn money, go on now!"

Everyone laughed. Sasha stood, brushing her hands together.

“All right, don’t worry, I’ll let ya’ll regroup,” Sasha said with a smile and a shake of her head.

She walked toward the punch table, filling her cup slowly. Then she heard it: yelling, cheering, sneakers screeching louder than before. Her eyes lifted toward the court, and she froze. Jimmy was running, not awkwardly, not trying, but running like he’d been doing it his entire life. Kellie stepped up beside her, following her gaze. On the court, Jimmy dribbled low and fast, bounce, crossover, spin. He moved like the ball belonged to him. Kellie blinked.

“…He’s having fun,” Kellie said in an almost low tone with a faint half smile.

Sasha smiled softly. Jimmy darted around someone twice his size, pivoted, stepped through contact and launched up for a clean, easy layup. Swish. The guys erupted. Tyrique slapped Jimmy’s chest. Marcus grabbed Jimmy in a half-hug as Jimmy lightly laughed. Kellie shook her head slowly.

“Wow, I’ve never seen him enjoy himself like that,” Kellie said, “not once.”

Sasha watched Jimmy smile—not the Sir Lord smirk, not the calculated charisma smile. This one was wide and unfiltered. It was eight-year-old joy in a grown man’s body.

“It’s good,” Sasha said quietly. “After everything he went through…he deserves days like this.”

Kellie nodded.

“Yeah.”

Kellie hesitated, but then looked at Sasha.

“Thank you.”

Sasha blinked.

“For what?” Sasha responded.

“For giving him the chance to change. For…not throwing him away when everyone else wanted to.”

Before Sasha could respond, Kellie gave her a small nod and walked off. Sasha stood there for a second, surprised. Then smiled faintly and headed toward her grandparents’ table.

Scene Song: “Just Like Music” ~ Eric Sermon ft. Marvin Gaye

Back on the basketball court, the score was tight, three on three. Jimmy's team up by one. Luke tossed the ball to Jimmy. Jimmy caught it mid-stride. Michael stepped in front of him. Jimmy slowed, bounced left, bounced right, and gave Michael a fake shoulder dip. Michael bit. Jimmy darted past him in one smooth, almost lazy glide, two steps, launch. Jimmy rose clean as he slammed the ball through the hoop with a controlled, powerful finish. Silence for half a beat. Then the court exploded. Tyrique grabbed Jimmy around the shoulders.

"Oh, nah! This man *different*!" Tyrique exclaimed before laughing.

Marcus clapped his hands hard.

"Where the hell you been hiding, bruh?!"

Jimmy laughed—that breathy, cocky, proud laugh. He adjusted his crown like it was part of the uniform.

"Not much I can't master," Jimmy said casually, his shoulders rolling back. "When you're Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, you tend to…excel."

Marcus laughed. Tyrique shook his head.

"A'ight, okay, Scotland."

Michael pointed at him.

"You ain't say you was *nice* like *that* though."

"Well, that's what happens when greatness goes unrecognized," Jimmy replied after shrugging with that faint, dangerous half-smile.

Tyrique slapped his shoulder while laughing. Game over. Jimmy's team had won.

"Come on. Let's grab something to drink," Tyrique said, "then maybe we can run Spades and embarrass some uncles and shit."

With a faint smile, Jimmy perked slightly at that.

"Yeah, I've heard about that Spades shite," Jimmy said. "Apparently, it causes a lot of fuckin' domestic disputes."

"Facts," Marcus said after laughing.

Tyrique nodded toward the picnic tables.

"You coming, Scotland?"

Jimmy gave one last glance at the court—like memorizing the moment— then nodded before walking off with them, his crown glinting in the sun. And for once—Jimmy didn't look haunted. He looked like a thirty-six-year-old at a cookout who just found out he's got game.

Scene Song: "Waiting To Exhale (Instrumental)" ~ Whitney Houston

The sky had shifted into that honey–lavender blend that only late summer evenings knew how to produce. The DJ had long since packed up. The spades tables were half-folded. Only a small pocket of people remained now—the die-hards. The lingerers. The "we ain't gotta go home yet" crowd. Sasha leaned against the side of her Lincoln Navigator, arms folded loosely, while Jimmy stood beside her with one foot propped against the tire. He looked content in that restless, hyper-aware way that was uniquely him. Bernie Mac stood in front of them mid-story, animated as ever.

"I'm tellin' you," Bernie said loudly, gesturing with both hands, "these little kids today don't fear nothin'! I walked in the house the other day, and my son had the nerve—the NERVE—to tell me, 'Dad, I ain't scared of you.'"

D.L. wheezed laughing.

Bernie continued, his voice rising in pitch.

"I said BOY, I will knock your little punk ass into next Tuesday and you gon' wake up in motherfucking *Wednesday* wonderin' what happened to goddamn *Monday*!"

Sasha burst out laughing, clutching her stomach. D.L. laughed, and Jimmy laughed heartily too—sharp, bright, unfiltered.

"I told him," Bernie continued, "'you don't pay no goddamn bills in this house! You ain't even paid for the *air* you breathin'!'"

Jimmy shook his head, grinning.

"Aye, that's fair," Jimmy said in his thick Scottish lilt. "If I had a kid talkin' back to me like that, I'd just give him the fuckin' death stare until he started questionin' his entire fuckin' existence."

D.L. laughed.

"Oh no," D.L. said with a smile. "Now *that's* the damn stare right there. *Man*, the death stare will make a kid reconsider their whole goddamn life, I swear to God."

Jimmy tilted his head slightly with a half smile.

"That's the 'I will *ruin* your fuckin' afternoon' stare," Jimmy said before sharing a laugh with Bernie and D.L. and Sasha.

"That boy got that villain energy," Bernie said with a smile. "I need to have you over to babysit these little bad ass motherfuckas of mine, I swear."

As Jimmy laughed, Sasha shook her head at Jimmy, smiling.

“Great, you encourage him, and he gets worse.”

Jimmy shrugged, unbothered with a smile.

“Can’t help it. I was raised by chaos.”

Bernie leaned in.

“Oh yeah, where you from again?”

“Scotland.”

Bernie squinted.

“Ohhhhh that’s right, yeah that explains it. Cold country. No sunshine. Y’all just out there growlin’ at sheep and shit.”

Jimmy didn’t miss a beat.

“Aye, we growl at sheep, drink whisky, and overthrow governments for sport.”

Bernie, D.L. and Sasha laughed before Bernie chuckled, then checked his watch.

“A’ight, ya’ll. I gotta go home before my kids redecorate the damn house with permanent marker or some shit like that.”

D.L. groaned.

“Yeah, I gotta go too, but hey—”

D.L. stopped, stepped toward Jimmy, and extended his hand.

“Hey, man. You an all right, man.”

Jimmy shook his hand firmly, then D.L. pulled him into a brief half-hug.

“You’re not bad yourself,” Jimmy replied with a half smile, “for a man who insults people professionally.”

D.L. laughed. Bernie stepped forward next and pulled Jimmy into a big hug that nearly lifted him.

“Yeah, you good people,” Bernie said. “Just don’t start no damn cult in my neighborhood.”

Jimmy smirked.

“No promises.”

They all laughed.

Later, the inside of the Navigator was dim, lit only by streetlights sliding across the dashboard. They were all engrossed in discussing the fun they had at the barbecue when Ian leaned forward from the back seat.

“How about you, Jimmy?” Ian said. “What was your favorite part?”

No answer. Sasha glanced over. Jimmy’s head had fallen slightly to the side. His breathing was slow, with one hand loosely resting on his thigh. He was sound asleep. Sasha smiled immediately.

“Oh,” she said softly, “he’s out.”

Ian leaned forward slightly, studying Jimmy with an amused, almost disbelieving expression.

“I guess so with the day he had,” Ian said. “I couldn’t believe what I was seeing out there from him today. I couldn’t believe that that was the same man who once calmly told me he would force-feed me my own intestines.”

Kellie lightly laughed,

“Character growth,” Kellie said softly.

Samson gave a faint, peaceful smile.

Scene Song: “Ordinary World” ~ Duran Duran

“It’s because of you two,” Samson said, looking between Sasha and Ian. “You gave him space to be something else.”

Ian nodded slowly.

“And proof,” Ian added, “proof that he didn’t have to stay what he was.”

Sasha’s fingers lightly adjusted the steering wheel as she glanced again at Jimmy. In sleep, he looked younger, not physically—but *emotionally*, unarmored.

“I think he just needed a normal day,” she said quietly, “no crosses, no blood, no judgment.”

Samson exhaled softly with a faint smile.

“See?” Samson told Ian, “there is hope for the ordinary world to return.”

Ian nodded once, Kellie leaned back.

“Yeah,” Kellie said quietly. “If Jimmy Crystal can enjoy candied yams and a line dance…”

She stopped and smirked faintly.

“…then maybe anything’s possible.”

Scene Song: “Stand Inside Your Love” ~ Smashing Pumpkins

The neighborhood was quiet when Sasha pulled up in front of Jimmy’s house. The porch light was on. The windows glowed soft amber against the deepening blue of the evening. Pelmont at night always felt gentler than Earth ever had—no sirens, no distant shouting, no undercurrent of danger humming beneath the pavement. Just stillness. Inside the Navigator, the only sound was the low hum of the engine. Jimmy was still asleep with his head tilted toward the window. In sleep, his face softened in a way that erased every sharp edge he usually carried. No smirk, no arrogance, no “Sir Lord.” Just *Jimmy*. Sasha reached over carefully and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Jimmy,” she said softly. “Wake up. You’re home.”

He stirred, his brow furrowing faintly. A small breath left him, almost a sigh. Then he blinked, slow and heavy-lidded, sitting upright in his seat as if surfacing from deep water. He looked around, confused for a second.

“Where…?” he muttered, his voice rough with sleep.

“We’re at your house,” she replied gently.

He blinked again, glancing through the windshield at the porch.

“Oh,” he said quietly, “right.”

He straightened in his seat and rubbed his face with both hands, trying to gather himself.

“Get out time, I suppose,” he added with a faint, sleepy half-smile.

Sasha smiled back at him.

“I hope you enjoyed yourself today.”

He glanced at her briefly, then he looked away. The smile faded. He leaned back into the seat instead of reaching for the door handle. His jaw tightened slightly as he stared out at his side mirror, his eyes unfocused. Sasha’s brow furrowed.

“Jimmy?”

He didn’t answer.

She leaned forward slightly, trying to catch his expression in the dim light from the dashboard.

“Hey,” she said softly, “is everything okay?”

He swallowed. She didn’t see the tears at first—not until she leaned in closer, her eyes adjusting to the shadows. His eyes were glassy and clouded. Her stomach dropped.

“Jimmy,” she said again, more gently now. “What’s wrong?”

He looked down at his hands, his fingers briefly flexing slowly against his jeans. His face tightened into a deep frown, the kind that always came before something honest.

“When I was on that cross,” he began quietly, his Scottish lilt heavy and stripped of bravado, “at The Bone Temple…”

His voice wavered.

“I thought I was going to die broken.”

He swallowed again.

“Broken and *abandoned*.”

The word *abandoned* came out softer than the rest.

“For twenty-eight years,” he continued, his eyes still down, “that’s what I was. Broken. Abandoned. In *pain*.”

His voice roughened.

“Mentally. Emotionally. All of it.”

He let out a short breath that almost sounded like a laugh, but it wasn’t.

“I thought I was hearing Satan. I thought I had answers.”

His jaw clenched briefly.

“But if I’m being honest…” he said, his voice lowering even more, “there was always some small…small…*small* part of me that knew I was just looking for something, an answer, a reason, a way to make the pain make sense.”

His throat tightened.

“And I never found it.”

His voice cracked.

“Not until Ian, yeah, not until someone finally looked at me like I wasn’t just a monster.”

He finally looked at her.

“But definitely not until you.”

The tears broke free then, sliding down his cheeks unchecked.

“You could’ve left me there,” he said, “on that porch. You could’ve written me off as some sociopath, some evil bastard who couldn’t be fixed.”

His breathing hitched.

“But you didn’t.”

He shook his head slightly.

“You didn’t give up on me just because of what I did.”

His voice trembled.

“You still saw that little boy in there. The one that got left behind in that church.”

He blinked hard as more tears fell from his eyes.

“You saw that I could be fixed, changed, *redeemed*. Today was—literally the *best* fuckin’ day I’ve ever had in my life. Today I finally got to just—*live* without worrying about the infected, without thinking about hurting and killing someone to ease pain and trauma. I just got the chance to just—*live,* and I got that chance because of you. My blood sisters…they’re gone, they’ve been gone since I was eight and ever since, I thought that was it.”

He shook his head faintly.

“But then I got another sister,” he said softly, “one who found me when I didn’t even know *I* was still in there, one who saved me before I was lost forever.”

Before she could respond, he leaned over suddenly and pulled her into a tight, desperate hug. His arms wrapped around her with a strength that wasn’t aggressive—it was *clinging*, it was *grounding*. He buried his face near her shoulder, fighting the sob rising in his chest.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “Thank you for saving me before I was lost forever.”

His grip tightened slightly.

“I love you for that,” he added.

Sasha’s own vision blurred as she wrapped her arms around him, holding him just as firmly. Her voice trembled when she spoke.

“Thank you,” she said softly, “for showing me that even sinners still have souls.”

He stilled at hearing her say that, because he understood *exactly* what she meant. His redemption didn't erase the past—but it proved there was something underneath it. Slowly, they pulled apart. Jimmy wiped at his face quickly, aggressively, as if the tears had personally offended him. He cleared his throat.

"If you tell anyone I got teary-eyed in this car," he said, attempting sternness, "I'll kick your fuckin' ass."

Sasha laughed through her remaining tears.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. I've got a reputation."

They both laughed softly, the heaviness dissolving just enough. He looked at her one more time.

"I'll see you tomorrow, sis," he said with a small smile.

She nodded.

"Tomorrow."

He opened the door and stepped out into the warm night air, closing it gently behind him. Sasha watched as he walked up the path toward his porch. For a second, under the porch light, he paused and adjusted his crown, then he went inside. Sasha sat there a moment longer before pulling away from the curb. Behind her, the house light remained on, and for the first time in his life— Jimmy Crystal was not broken. He was *home*.

****

Later, Jimmy lay sprawled diagonally across his bed like he owned gravity itself, one leg hanging off the side, socked foot gently bouncing. The TV in the corner glowed with oversaturated color—green hills, a baby-faced sun, the kind of weird cheerfulness that would've felt like a hallucination anywhere else. *Teletubbies*. He watched it with an intensity he'd never offered anything holy. Because it wasn't just a children's show to him. It was a time capsule. A last flicker of normal he'd once had—back before Scotland turned into a mouth full of teeth, before the church, before the infected. Before, he learned the shape of pain so well that he built a religion out of it. On the screen, the Teletubbies waddled toward their little table like it was the most important meeting in the world. Jimmy smiled like an amused eight-year-old.

"Here we go," he muttered to himself, his voice quiet and gravelly. "They're about to sit down and have their…custard shite."

Jimmy laughed heartily seconds before a knock hit the front door of his house. Jimmy didn't move at first. He paused the TV with the remote like he was stopping time, then stared at the ceiling for a beat as if deciding whether the universe deserved his participation. The knock came again, sharper. He sighed dramatically and rolled off the bed.

"Goddamn it," he grumbled as he dashed down the stairs. "I swear to fuckin' God if it's Spike asking for fuckin' potato salad leftovers—"

He yanked the door open.

Kellie stood there, arms folded, looking mildly entertained by his existence. Jimmy's brow lifted. His frown formed like it had muscle memory.

"...*You*," he said flatly. "What are you doing on my doorstep this fuckin' late? Lose your way back to whatever cave you crawled out of?"

Kellie's mouth curved into a slow smile.

"Hi to you too, Jimmy."

Jimmy leaned on the doorframe, giving her that unblinking stare—part insult, part assessment, part *what fresh hell is this*.

"You here to start some shite?" he asked, "or just to stand there looking fuckin' smug?"

Kellie didn't answer. She just pushed past him—playfully, but with enough confidence that it was also a power move—and walked into his house like she'd been invited. Jimmy turned, blinking once in disbelief.

"Oh *yeah,*" he replied as he swung the door shut, slow and annoyed. "Just walk in without me telling you to for fuck's sake."

"I was tired of hearing Ian and Spike's mom and Samson playin' Duran Duran records for hours while they play cards," Kellie said over her shoulder. "I felt like I was trapped inside a man's midlife crisis."

Jimmy scoffed, following her up the stairs and down the hall on the second floor.

"Ian gets nostalgic," he replied with a smile. "It's what happens when you've got a fuckin' brain the size of a planet and no idea how to relax."

Kellie walked into his bedroom and froze—because the Teletubbies were still paused on-screen, four bright creatures staring blankly into the room like they'd caught them doing something illegal. Kellie burst out laughing.

"No way," she said, her voice loud with delight. "You're watching the Teletubbies?"

Jimmy's eyes narrowed instantly, defensive.

"Of course, it's…cultural," he said.

Kellie climbed onto the bed without asking and flopped across the end like she belonged there. Jimmy climbed back up on the bed too—moving with an adult-body, child-energy bounce he got when he forgot to be composed. He grabbed the remote and hit play again. Kellie smiled at the screen.

“I came right on time. This episode is a good one.”

Jimmy stared at the TV with his signature full smile.

“Yeah,” he said, “you showed up right before the teletummies were about to sit down and have fuckin’ custard.”

They watched for a minute. The room was softly lit—Pelmont night outside his window, calm and clean, no sirens, no dread. Just the glow of the TV and the strange comfort of a stupid old show. Kellie’s laughter faded into quiet. Then she shifted, rubbing her stomach.

Scene Song: “Pony” Ginuwine

Kellie shifted beside him, rubbing her stomach.

“Damn,” she muttered. “I’m hungry.”

Jimmy didn’t look at her.

“Aww, that’s tragic,” he said, “has absolutely fuckin’ nothing to do with me.”

Kellie turned her head slowly, smiling like she’d just spotted a loose thread and intended to pull it.

“It does,” she replied, “because I’m hungry, and you’ve got a fridge.”

That made Jimmy finally look at her, his brows lifting with offended disbelief.

“The audacity,” he said, a faint half-smile tugging at his mouth.

Kellie laughed.

“What? I’m hungry. This is your house. You need to go downstairs and solve my problem.”

Jimmy held her gaze for a few seconds too long with that signature Sir Lord stare settling over her like he was reading an entire book without touching the cover. After a few seconds, he displayed a dangerous little smile.

“Well,” he said slowly, his voice dropping just enough to test the air between them, “I’m fuckin’ horny. You gonna solve that, or are we just listing problems tonight?”

Kellie didn’t blink. She just gave him a long, unimpressed look.

“You have a hand. Use it,” she responded.

The bluntness made Jimmy huff out a startled little laugh. He leaned back into the pillows, still looking at her.

“I’d rather just have you,” he said. “If you’re done bein’ clever.”

That made the room go quiet, not awkward, just charged. The Teletubbies kept babbling on in the background, bright and oblivious and ridiculous, while neither of them looked away. Kellie sat up slowly and turned toward him more fully.

“You serious?” she asked, her smile smaller now. “You actually wanna...mess around?”

Jimmy gave a shrug that tried for casual and failed halfway through.

“Yeah,” he said.

Then, quieter—because apparently once he started telling the truth, he couldn’t stop himself—he added:

“I mean...I’ve never done it before, but...”

That caught her off guard. Her brows lifted before she smoothed the surprise away. After a second, she gave a small shrug of her own.

“Neither have I,” she replied.

Jimmy looked away and laughed under his breath, like that information had taken some strange pressure off him.

“Well,” he said, glancing back at her with the faintest smile, “there’s a first time for everything.”

Kellie looked down at the bedspread for a moment, thinking. Then she nodded once.

“Okay.”

Jimmy swallowed. For all his arrogance and ridiculously pretty confidence, there was something almost painfully boyish in the way he hesitated. Like permission itself had stunned him. Like he didn’t quite know what to do now that he’d gotten it. Kellie moved first. She shifted closer and kissed him, not dramatically, not like she knew exactly what she was doing, just carefully, tentatively. Testing the shape of it. Jimmy went still for half a second. Then his hand found her waist, uncertain at first, then firmer when she didn’t pull away. The kiss deepened a little, then a little more, and the room changed around them. The television

was still on. The Teletubbies were still making nonsense noises in the corner. But none of it mattered now.

Jimmy made a soft sound against her mouth—a surprised reaction to the kiss. Then he frowned as if he were almost offended by his own reaction. Kellie smiled into the kiss. He pulled back just enough to look at her, his eyes a little too wide.

“Holy shite,” he whispered with a boyish smile.

Kellie laughed softly.

“Yeah,” she said.

Jimmy stared at her for another second like he was waiting for the world to interrupt. For something awful to happen. For pain to come rushing in and ruin it the way it ruined everything else, but nothing did, no screaming, no blood, no commands, no punishment, just Kellie, warm and close and looking back at him like this was allowed. That seemed to hit him harder than anything. Something in his face changed then—not softer exactly, but younger, stripped down.

The bravado didn’t vanish, but it faltered long enough for the truth under it to show through. He kissed her again, hungrier this time, and she kissed him back just as hard. It still wasn’t smooth, still wasn’t polished. There were awkward shifts, bumped elbows, little breathless laughs when one of them moved wrong or got tangled up in the sheets. But that was what made it feel real. Two people who had survived too much, figuring out tenderness like it was a language neither one had been taught properly. Jimmy kept reacting to everything like it was half miracle, half attack. Every time Kellie touched him in some new way, his whole body seemed to briefly forget what century it was. At one point, he pulled back again just to stare at her, flushed and visibly wrecked by the whole thing.

“What the fuck,” he breathed, not upset, just utterly amazed.

Kellie laughed so hard she had to cover her mouth.

“Jimmy.”

“No, seriously,” he said, shaking his head once like he’d just discovered fire. “What the *fuck?*”

That sent her off into laughter again, and somehow, that laughter helped. It kept the moment from becoming too heavy, too sacred, too frightening. It let him stay in it. Let him stop trying to perform. Stop trying to be good at it. Stop trying to be anything except what he was: a thirty-six-year-old man with the emotional wiring of a neglected kid, discovering that being touched didn’t have to mean pain, that maybe it could mean comfort, *warmth*, *want*, *safety*. He clung to that realization almost as tightly as he clung to her. The rest of the night blurred after that—kisses, hands, breathless laughter, and later, much later, when the room had gone quiet except for their breathing, Jimmy lay half-sprawled beside her, hair a mess, face flushed, still looking faintly stunned by his own existence. For a long moment, he said

nothing. He just stared up at the ceiling like it had personally changed shape. Then he let out a small, dazed laugh and dragged one hand over his face.

“Well,” he said hoarsely, “fuck me.”

Kellie turned her head toward him, smiling into the pillow.

“Jimmy,” she said, laughing softly, “I think that was sort of the point.”

That got a real laugh out of him—bright, brief, helpless. Then he turned onto his side and looked at her with that strange mix he carried so naturally: one part Sir Lord arrogance, one part eight-year-old astonishment.

“We are absolutely fuckin’ doing that again,” he said with complete seriousness. “Soon. Preferably *immediately*.”

Kellie stared at him for a beat, then laughed harder.

“Jimmy, shut up.”

He smiled, leaned in, and kissed her again anyway—slower this time, warmer, like he was still trying to make sure she was real. And in the quiet after, with the night settling softly around the house, Jimmy Crystal lay there looking less like a violent cult leader and more like what he had always been underneath all the damage: just a man, stunned by tenderness, and not ready for it to end.

Scene Song: “Still Not A Player” ~ Big Pun

The room was still warm in that afterglow way, with the sheets twisted, the air heavy, and Jimmy’s TV displaying yet another episode of Teletubbies. Jimmy sat up against the headboard, bare chest rising and falling fast. His platinum hair clung slightly at the temples, and sweat beaded along his forehead like he’d just finished a fight he didn’t know he’d volunteered for. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, then let out a breathy, disbelieving laugh—half joy, half *“what the fuck did I just survive?”* Kellie pushed herself upright too, hair mussed, expression dazed in that same stunned way, except hers was calmer —like her mind was already filing the experience away under *noted.* Jimmy stared at the wall for a second, still catching his breath.

“Holy shite,” he said, his voice hoarse, before laughing again—bright, boyish, almost goofy. “I can’t believe it was even fuckin’ *better* the second time.”

Kellie let out a laugh too, shaking her head.

“You’re acting like you just discovered fire.”

“I did,” Jimmy replied instantly like he meant it. “And I’m tellin’ you right now…whoever invented sex deserves a fuckin’ knighthood. I mean, I knew *what* it was. I just didn’t know it was *like that.*”

Kellie snorted.

“You would say that.”

Jimmy glanced at her with a half-smile, then leaned his head back against the headboard like his body was still trying to reboot. Kellie’s amusement faded into something a little more thoughtful. She shifted, pulling the sheet up, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

“So…” she said slowly, “what happens now?”

Jimmy blinked once, like the question was strange. Then he shrugged easily—*too* easily.

Now?” he repeated. “Now you go home at some point, I suppose.”

Kellie stared at him. Jimmy continued, completely calm, as if he were explaining the weather.

“And I’ll see you…whenever I see you,” he said, casual as hell. “Maybe at another barbecue. Maybe at a town meeting. Maybe when you get hungry and start acting like my fridge is your personal charity.”

Kellie’s mouth twitched—half smile, half *seriously?* She looked him up and down with a faint frown and a raised brow.

“You are unbelievable.”

Jimmy’s eyes flicked to her.

“I’m *Sir Lord*,” he corrected automatically, because of course he did.

Kellie rolled her eyes.

“Right. Sir Lord of Emotional Avoidance.”

Jimmy scoffed like he’d been insulted, but his mouth was still threatening to smile.

“I’m not avoiding anything,” he said. “I’m being crystal fuckin’ clear.”

Kellie stared at him for a beat, then huffed a small laugh and looked away.

“Well,” she said, her voice shifting into that slightly more guarded tone she used when she didn’t want to admit she cared, “I was talking to some of the girls at the Barbecue.”

Jimmy briefly frowned.

“That sounds like a threat.”

Kellie ignored him.

“They were talking about this thing called…friends with benefits.”

Jimmy’s brow lifted.

“That sounds like some kind of scam.”

“It’s not a scam,” Kellie snapped, then softened into a smirk. “It’s when two friends occasionally…do what we just did.”

Jimmy blinked slowly, processing, like his brain had to scroll through a menu. Then he shrugged again, childishly unbothered.

“Yeah,” he said, “whatever, sure.”

Kellie watched him closely.

“So you’d be up for that?”

Jimmy’s gaze slid to her, his eyes half-lidded with that faint, dangerous charm he wore like a weapon. He shrugged once more while slightly shaking his head.

“Yeah,” he said, “but we’re not making it fuckin’ weird.”

Kellie snorted.

“Oh, it’s already weird.”

Jimmy pointed at her with lazy authority.

“And don’t tell Sasha.”

Kellie stared at him with a brow raised and a faint frown.

“Why?”

Jimmy stared at her like she’d asked why the sky was blue.

“Because she’ll fuckin’ *blow her stack,*” he said plainly. “She’ll start doing that mothering shite that she does so well—asking questions, interrogating me, acting like I’m still eight years old.”

Kellie smirked.

“You do act like an eight-year-old.”

Jimmy shot her a look.

“I’m serious, Kellie,” he continued, his voice lowering. “If Sasha finds out her ‘baby brother’ is having *sex*—”

He jerked his chin at the bed like it had personally disrespected him.

“—she’ll go fuckin’ ballistic.”

Kellie laughed, the sound sharp and genuine.

“She would?”

“She *absolutely* fuckin’ would,” Jimmy said, nodding with a serious expression. “She’ll start actin’ weird with me, and I can’t—”

He cut himself off with a hard swallow.

“I’m not dealin’ with that,” he added.

Kellie shook her head, still smiling.

“Fine. I won’t tell her.”

“*Good*,” Jimmy said, satisfied.

Then, as if the discussion was fully concluded, he swung his legs off the bed and stood. Kellie watched him rise with a brow raised, amused by how quickly he shifted back into “Sir Lord” mode—like intimacy hadn’t happened, like feelings weren’t allowed to linger. Jimmy stretched once, then started toward the bathroom door like it was business as usual. Halfway there, he glanced back over his shoulder.

“And lock up when you leave,” he said, his tone casual. “You don’t have a key—so don’t leave my door hangin’ open like a muppet.”

Kellie stared at him, then burst out laughing.

“I like my house the way it is,” he added, “uninvaded.”

“You are ridiculous,” she said.

Jimmy smiled as he disappeared into the bathroom, muttering something that sounded like, “I know,” like it was a compliment. Kellie sat there for another second, shaking her head, smiling to herself as she gathered her things. Outside the bathroom, the water turned on. Inside the room, Kellie, still laughing under her breath, left him to his night—because that was the deal: Friends with benefits.

Chapter 5

Scene Song: "Love Me Still" ~ Chaka Khan

Sunday in Pelmont came in soft—bright but not loud. The kind of morning that didn't demand anything from you. The sun sat clean in a cloudless blue sky, and the air had that gentle, coastal-warm feel like the whole realm was exhaling. Sasha's home was quiet, too quiet. Jimmy stood outside her door in an all-black tracksuit—sharp white stripes, rings flashing, tiara gleaming like he'd woken up and chosen audacity. He knelt, lifted the welcome mat like it was a ritual, and took the key out from underneath with the casual confidence of a man who truly believed the world was his.

"Still under the mat," he muttered, faintly amused. "For fuck's sake."

He unlocked the door and walked inside like he owned the lease. Her apartment was dim with morning shade, curtains half-drawn, the room still holding the sleepy warmth of someone who finally let herself crash. The only sound was the soft hum of the fridge and the distant, muffled noise of Pelmont waking up outside. Jimmy moved toward her bedroom doorway without making a single careful step. He stopped there, leaning on the frame. Sasha lay asleep on her back, her hair splayed, and her face relaxed in a way he rarely got to see—no weight on her brow, no guard on her mouth.

The sight hit him with something that looked like pride at first. His lips curved into a small, pleased smile—like a little kid watching his big sister sleep after she'd promised she'd be okay. Then the smile slowly faded. Something in his eyes changed. A dimming. A soft sinking. Because the quiet didn't just feel peaceful. It felt *lonely* in a way that made his chest hurt.

He stood there for a few seconds too long, staring at her like he was trying to memorize the fact that she was real and safe and still there. Then he did what made sense to the part of him that was still eight years old—he walked into the room, climbed onto the mattress, and curled up at the bottom of her bed, like if he stayed close enough, the world couldn't take her away too. He curled up small at the foot of her bed with his arms tucked in, his knees drawn slightly, and his tiara still on his head like a child refusing to take off his favorite thing, even to sleep. Jimmy closed his eyes, maybe pretending, maybe really falling asleep; either way, he went still.

An hour later, Sasha woke to sunlight and the faint ache of a body that had worked too much the day before at the barbecue and rested too little. She sat up slowly, blinking, then looked down the bed…and froze. Jimmy was asleep at the bottom, curled up like a stray puppy who'd adopted her while she wasn't looking. Sasha stared for a long moment, then turned her

head away and laughed under her breath, shaking her head like she couldn't believe this was her life.

"You are unreal," she whispered.

She climbed out of bed quietly, walked over to him, and stooped down beside him. With a smile, she gently brushed strands of his platinum blond hair back from his face as she heard his soft breathing. After gently kissing him on the top of his head like a proud and protective sister, she walked across the room and grabbed the knitted blanket off the back of her sofa. The blanket was soft, heavy, and warm—handmade comfort. She draped it over him carefully, tucking it around his shoulders. Jimmy didn't wake. He only shifted his face deeper into the mattress and exhaled like he'd been holding his breath for years. Sasha stood there for a second, looking down at him. Then she turned and went to shower and get ready for her day.

Later, the apartment smelled like coffee. Sasha stood in the kitchen in comfortable clothes, hair damp, moving with that calm morning rhythm—mug, spoon, sugar, the simple ritual of rebuilding yourself after sleep. The sound of shoes shuffled behind her. Jimmy wandered in like he'd been born there, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm. His tiara and rings still gleaming like he'd slept through a royal ceremony. He paused in the doorway, stared at her, then smiled, a *real* one. Then he huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head like she was ridiculous.

"How the hell did you let me sleep on your bed and not say anything?" he asked, his voice still thick with sleep. "You didn't even kick me off."

Sasha glanced over her shoulder with a small smile.

"Good morning to you too."

Jimmy scoffed softly, waving a hand.

"You know what I mean," he said. "Yesterday you were mad and giving me that look like I was a criminal for using the key under the mat."

Sasha shrugged, pouring coffee like this was the least surprising conversation she'd ever had.

"I wasn't mad," she said.

Jimmy blinked with a faint smile.

"You *were* mad."

"I was surprised," Sasha corrected, "there's a difference."

Jimmy leaned against the counter, staring at her like he was trying to pull the truth out of her face.

"So why weren't you mad today?" he asked. "Why didn't you start with all that 'Jimmy, you can't just break in' shite?"

Sasha handed him a mug without asking if he wanted one.

“Because you don’t need permission,” she said simply. “This is your home too, your second home away from your own home.”

Jimmy went still. Sasha’s tone stayed casual, like she was talking about something obvious, like the sky being blue.

“In fact,” she added before opening and reaching into a nearby drawer, “you should keep the key.”

She placed it on the counter in front of him. Jimmy stared at it, then he stared at her. His mouth opened like he was going to speak. Nothing came out. A faint frown formed, but it wasn’t anger. It was a feeling of being overwhelmed, like the concept of being allowed somewhere without earning it was physically confusing. He swallowed hard.

“Fuckin’ *hell*,” he said quietly. “Why are you *like* this?”

Sasha raised an eyebrow, amused.

“What? What do you mean? Why am I like what?”

Jimmy stared at her for a long beat, his eyes briefly squinting—analyzing, reading, trying to find the trick. Then he exhaled sharply and looked away like the words were embarrassing.

“After *everything* I did on Earth,” he said quietly, his voice losing its swagger, “I don’t deserve someone as…good as you in my life.”

Sasha didn’t interrupt. She just waited, a coffee mug warming her hands. Jimmy’s jaw tightened. He glanced back at her, eyes serious in a way that made him look older than his face.

“I mean—no matter what,” he said, “you just keep *treating* me like I *matter*. And I really don’t, being on that cross taught me that—”

He stopped and shook his head once, hard.

“I just don’t understand—I don’t understand why.”

His gaze dropped to his rings like they were evidence.

“Everyone else had a reason to hate me,” he said. “Ian, Kellie, Spike, even The Jimmies. Everybody I ever came across in those twenty-eight years, I did the most *horrible* shite, I know I did.”

His voice roughened.

“So why don’t *you* hate me?” he asked, blunt and quiet. “Why do you keep…*being* like this?”

Sasha looked at him for a moment like she was trying to decide how honest to be. Then she laughed softly and shook her head, warm and fond, like he was asking why the ocean was wet.

"Because you're not that same *person*, Jimmy," she said.

Jimmy's eyes flicked up.

"You—you still don't get it," Sasha continued, her tone calm but certain, "in this realm…the truth hits you, all at once, immediate, total, instant gnosis."

Jimmy stared, unblinking.

"The afterlife doesn't let you hide from what you did," she said, "but it also doesn't trap you inside the sickness that made you do it."

She stepped closer, voice softer now.

"On Earth, you were buried under madness and trauma and pain. But *here*? That stuff gets stripped away. It doesn't erase what happened. But it reveals what was underneath it."

Jimmy's throat bobbed as he swallowed. His eyes were too shiny now, like light was catching something he didn't want seen. Sasha kept going because she knew he needed the full explanation, not comfort-fluff.

"And before I even crossed over here," she said, "I *knew* that would happen to you."

Jimmy's brows pulled together.

"How?"

"Because everybody kept telling me it was impossible," Sasha said, smiling faintly. "They said one, people from films and TV can't even come into existence in the afterlife—so I was crazy for believing it."

Jimmy's mouth twitched like that sounded familiar.

"And two," Sasha continued, "even if you did exist, they said there was no redemption for you. That you were unfixable. Permanently evil."

Jimmy flinched—just a tiny reaction, like an old wound getting pressed. Sasha's eyes narrowed with a hint of irritation.

"And as you already know," she said, "Jack O'Connell said you were sociopathic and perhaps insane, and I strongly didn't like what he said about you, by the way."

Jimmy blinked, surprised.

"You didn't?"

Sasha frowned with a shake of her head.

“No,” she replied, “because it felt incomplete. Jack seemed to understand *pieces* of you—the corruption, the childlike parts, the way you never really got to grow up—but not the *full* hurt underneath it, not the abandoned little boy trying to make pain *mean* something. And you know, it’s funny how he could find *layers* when he played Remmick in *Sinners*, but when it came to you, he thought you were insane and a sociopath, and I just thought that was wrong and a lazy misunderstanding. You weren’t a sociopath or insane; you were an abuse victim trying to cure your pain and abandonment through the only ways you could find in a violent world, such as the one you lived in. ”

Jimmy stared at her, speechless. Sasha softened, her voice turning gentler.

“But no one could seem to understand that, but I could, and I did,” she said. “I knew your heart without even *knowing* how I knew it, and that’s why I was determined to do what everyone said was impossible. I was determined to come to the afterlife, bring you into existence, help change you, and then help redeem you, not because you ‘*deserved*’ it in the way people mean that word, or because I thought that the violent things that you did were okay—”

She shrugged.

“But because I loved you,” Sasha said simply, “as the baby brother I always wanted and never had. Jimmy, there’s one thing Jack said about you that actually stuck though. He called you a ‘case of arrested development’—basically a ‘terrified ten-year-old’ trapped in a man’s body because your world paused in 2001. And you know what? I *get* it. I’m forty-one, but I’m right there with you. I mean, there are times when I myself still revert back to being eight or nine years old, finding joy and happiness in watching cartoons and shows like *Jem & The Holograms*.”

Jimmy frowned, confused with a brow raised.

“Jem & The Holograms?” Jimmy asked with a half smile. “What the hell is that—”

“Never mind, I’ll show ya some episodes later,” Sasha cut in with an amused smile, as Jimmy lightly laughed. “Anyway, you’ve been through childhood trauma, and so have I. You’re a free-spirited, energetic soul, and so am I. You—you remind me so, *so* much of myself, and the funny thing is, growing up, I always said how I wished I had a younger brother who was kind of like another version of myself, a sibling twin flame if you will, and now, I do. I have *you*.”

The kitchen went quiet. Jimmy looked away slowly, nodding once as if he was trying to keep control of his face. His jaw clenched. He bit down on his lower lip for a second, hard enough to stop it from trembling. Sasha watched him, and she *knew* his eyes were glistening, but she didn’t say it. She didn’t want to embarrass him. Jimmy’s breath hitched once, then he moved —fast. He crossed the small kitchen space in two steps and pulled her into a hug so tight it startled the air out of her. It wasn’t aggressive. It was desperate. It was the kind of hug that came from somewhere much younger than thirty-six, the kind that said: *don’t take this back.*

His arms locked around her with his face tucked against her shoulder. In a low, cracked voice that was almost a whisper, he said:

“Thank you.”

Sasha hugged him back immediately, firm and grounding before speaking with soft authority —no hesitation, no negotiation.

“Don’t ever say that again, Jimmy.”

Jimmy stilled. Sasha squeezed him tighter.

“You don’t thank family for loving you,” she said quietly. “You hear me? You’re my brother. That’s it. That’s the whole rule.”

Jimmy didn’t answer. He just held on like he finally believed her, and for once, the silence didn’t feel lonely. It felt like home.

Scene Song: “28 Years Later: The Bone Temple (End Theme)”

They eased out of the hug slowly—like neither of them wanted to be the first to let go. Sasha didn’t move right away. She just stared at him, eyes slightly narrowed, mouth tilted into a half-smile that wasn’t teasing so much as knowing—like she was reading the way his soul sat inside his body. Jimmy’s smile wobbled. He gave her a faint frown and a nervous little grin, shifting his weight like he suddenly forgot what to do with his hands.

“…Why are you lookin’ at me like that?” he asked, the Scottish lilt soft but wary—like a little boy caught in a doorway.

Sasha’s shoulders bounced with a quiet laugh, but her voice stayed gentle.

“How was your night?” she asked.

Jimmy blinked.

“My—what?”

Her smile widened just a touch.

“With Kellie,” she responded.

The color climbed into Jimmy’s face instantly, and his eyes started blinking too fast—like his body was trying to erase the last twelve hours by force. His voice changed when he answered —deeper, rougher, that same cross-cadence creeping in like a shadow he couldn’t fully outrun.

“Sasha…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said slowly. “I wasn’t with Kellie last night.”

Sasha sighed like she’d heard the worst lie ever told.

“Jimmy,” she said, laughing again, “you can’t lie to me.”

Jimmy’s eyes darted.

“*Yes,* I can,” he muttered, instantly defensive, like that was a principle.

“No, you can’t,” Sasha replied, dead calm, “not here, not in Pelmont. Everybody has expanded gnosis. People can read souls stronger than they ever could on Earth.”

Jimmy’s shoulders tensed. Sasha took a slow sip of her coffee like she was enjoying this.

“I know you slept with her,” she said simply.

Jimmy froze. His face stayed red, but now his expression shifted into something smaller—caught. Like a kid with cookie crumbs on his mouth, insisting he didn’t touch the jar. He fidgeted once, then backed up and sat down at the kitchen table, lowering himself into a chair like his legs forgot how to work.

“Aye…I did,” he admitted in a low voice.

Sasha pulled out the chair across from him and sat down too, casual as anything, like they were discussing the weather.

“I know, silly,” she said with a soft smile. “So…are you and Kellie an item now?”

Jimmy’s eyes snapped up to her so fast it was almost comical. His face tightened with shame. He looked away again immediately.

“…No,” he said, his voice small.

Sasha took a bigger sip of coffee, unbothered. Jimmy watched her over the rim of his own embarrassment, his frown deepening—not anger, not annoyance. *Fear*. The kind that didn’t make sense in a safe realm but that still lived in his body. His Scottish accent thickened, rougher, more pronounced, like it always did when the old wounds were close.

“…Are you gonna start looking at me differently now?” he asked, his voice low, almost dark with worry.

Sasha blinked, caught off guard by the seriousness.

But before she could answer—Jimmy’s eyes began to glisten. Not full tears yet. Just that glassy shine that warned they were coming. His mouth tightened. He rolled his eyes like he was angry at his own feelings.

“Oh no. This is why I didn’t want you to know,” he muttered. “Because now you’re gonna start thinkin’…different. You’re not gonna see me as your baby brother anymore.”

Sasha frowned, confused. Jimmy’s voice dropped further.

“You’re not gonna see me as your cute wee cuddly puppy anymore—”

He stopped and shook his head sharply, like he hated the words.

“You’re gonna think less of me now.”

He sucked his teeth and brought his fist to his mouth, trying to hold himself together. Trying to swallow the panic down like it was acid. Sasha stared at him, half-smile gone now.

“Jimmy…” she said gently. “What are you talking about?”

He looked down at the table like the wood grain was safer than her eyes, and then, to her shock, he whispered, tearfully—

“I’m sorry.”

Then the tears hit, not violent sobs. Not dramatic. Light, broken little sobs—the kind a child makes when they’re trying not to cry because they think crying will get them punished. Sasha’s eyes widened.

“Aw, Jimmy—” she scooted her chair closer fast and reached for his hands.

“Jimmy, what are you *crying* about? Jeez…”

His fingers were warm and tense in hers, as he kept repeating it, soft and shaken:

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry…”

Sasha pulled him into a hug, firm and close, hearing those quiet sobs against her shoulder. When he didn’t stop sobbing, she gently pushed him back by the shoulders and then still held his hands.

“Look at me,” she said.

Jimmy hesitated, but then slowly lifted his head. Tears clung to his lashes. His cheeks were wet. His face looked younger at this moment, stripped of adulthood. Sasha’s voice softened.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she said. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Jimmy swallowed hard. Sasha kept going, practical and warm all at once.

“You’re human,” she said. “People do it. Birds do it. Hell, even animals do it. It’s life. It’s living. It’s…*normal*.”

She tilted her head.

“Why on Earth would I look at you differently?”

Jimmy’s lower lip trembled slightly. He blinked hard like he hated his own vulnerability.

“Be–because...” he said quietly through light sobs, stumbling over the word. “I know you like to mother me. Be protective. You see me as this little...precious fuckin’ thing you’ve got to look after.”

Sasha’s brows lifted. He continued, rushing now, like if he said it fast enough it wouldn’t hurt.

“And even though I protest it all the time,” he muttered tearfully, “I don’t want you to stop. I don’t want you to stop seein’ me like that. So…I’m sorry, I’m *so* sorry. I won’t do it again, not if it makes you look at me different. I promise I won’t.”

Jimmy’s voice cracked on the last word. He swallowed hard, like he was trying to force the fear back down, but it was already out—already shaking in his chest. He stared at the table a second too long, jaw tight, like he was watching an old memory play behind his eyes.

“My father used to look at me like that whenever I’d do anything he thought of as wrong—playing outside for longer than I was supposed to, forgetting to pray before bed,” he whispered tearfully, his voice barely audible. “And he’d always look at me like that right before he’d…turn away again. Like he was listenin’ to God more than he was listenin’ to me. Like Judgment Day mattered more than I did.”

His fingers curled, knuckles going pale. And then it slipped out—small and raw, like eight-year-old Jimmy had grabbed the steering wheel.

“*Please*...don’t leave,” he whispered, his eyes clouding with more tears, blinking fast like he hated it. “Don’t—don’t abandon me, okay?”

As he broke into light sobs again, he shook his head once, frantic, wiping his face again like the tears that were streaming were insulting him.

“Please don’t stop bein’ my sister,” he added, his voice trembling through his sobs. “Don’t… don’t just decide one day that I’m too much shite and you’re done with me.”

Sasha’s expression changed immediately—no teasing, no laughter, no jokes. Just understanding, like she didn’t even have to think to know exactly where what Jimmy was saying came from. She scooted closer, grabbed his hands again, and held them tight.

“Jimmy,” she said firmly, warm but absolute. “Look at me.”

He hesitated, then lifted his eyes—still tearful, still scared.

“I’m *not* your father,” Sasha said softly. “I’m *not* leaving you.”

Jimmy’s breath hitched.

“I’m *not* abandoning you,” she repeated, as if saying it twice could stitch it into his bones. “And I’m *not* stopping being your sister. *Ever*.”

She squeezed his hands harder.

“You hear me? You’re stuck with me,” she said, a gentler smile returning through the seriousness. “For life in this afterlife.”

Jimmy let out a shaky breath, like his whole body had been braced for impact and finally realized it wasn’t coming. He then aggressively wiped his face with his sleeve.

“*And*,” she continued. “I am *always* going to see you as my baby brother.”

Jimmy blinked. Sasha leaned closer, her voice playful now.

“You will *always* be my little precious thing,” she said, “my adorable little Golden Retriever puppy—”

Jimmy’s face twisted in immediate disgust.

“Oh for fuck’s sake—”

“—or wolf,” Sasha amended quickly before laughing, “my adorable little baby wolf that wears a tiara and sometimes eats up all my cereal before I even can.”

Jimmy huffed out a laugh despite himself—small and light. Sasha nudged his knee lightly with hers.

“Jimmy,” she said, gentler now, “being intimate with someone doesn’t change who you are to me. It’s called life. It’s called growth. It’s called *development*.”

She smiled, teasing again.

“And I actually think it’s cute that you and Kellie got together. I like you two as a couple.”

Jimmy looked up at her with a faint, brief frown that clearly said: *what? Absolutely not.*

Then he let out a short, disbelieving laugh and shook his head.

“No, no, no,” he muttered, “don’t do that.”

Sasha smiled.

“I’m just saying,” she said. “Y’all are cute.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes, but the panic had drained out of him. He wiped the last of his tears away with the heel of his palm, sniffling once. Sasha’s smile softened.

“I will *always* love you,” she said simply. “And I will *never* look at you differently because you did something human.”

She leaned back slightly, making sure he heard her.

“Okay?”

Jimmy stared at her for a beat, then nodded.

“…Okay,” he said in a low voice.

He leaned forward and hugged her again, slower this time. Not desperate—just grateful. Sasha hugged him back and patted his shoulder.

“Ah, kid,” she sighed with a smile, “you’re a case.”

Jimmy let out that soft, boyish laugh again.

“Aye,” he muttered into her shoulder. “I know.”

And for the first time since he’d walked in with the key under the mat, he looked like he could breathe. Sasha slapped his leg—light, playful, a “get up” tap that still carried sister-authority.

“Come on,” she said, already standing. “I’m taking you somewhere fun.”

Jimmy blinked at her like she’d just announced a surprise apocalypse, then slowly rose from his chair—*not* rushing, not scrambling. He stood with that deliberate, controlled motion that meant he was hauling himself back into Sir Lord mode. Shoulders back. Chin up. A faint half-smile, trying to pretend he hadn’t just been crying five minutes ago.

“Where are we goin’?” he asked, brow raised, mouth tugging into a small, suspicious frown. “And if you say a dentist again, I’m gonna throw myself into the sea.”

“You’ll see,” Sasha said with a smile.

Scene Song: “This Is How We Do It” ~ Montell Jordan

Pelmont Skating Rink was *alive,* not barbecue--alive—*different*. This was neon and music and chaos alive. The air smelled like popcorn, sweet soda, and that faint rubbery skate smell that clung to the place like history. The rink itself glowed under shifting floodlights—reds washing into greens, then soft gold, then blue—moving across the polished floor like liquid color. Kids flew by in clumps, laughing too loudly.

Teenagers leaned into the rails, doing that effortless cool thing teenagers think they invented. Older people skated around the rink, some fast, some slow, but continuously steady. The DJ booth sat near the center, speakers thumping so hard Jimmy felt it in his ribs. Montell Jordan

blasted over everything. Jimmy walked in and stopped dead. He looked around with slightly widened eyes, mouth parted, scanning the place like it was some kind of futuristic arena. He hadn't seen anything like this in twenty-eight years of dirt, blood, and survival.

"Holy shite," he muttered, tone reverent. "This place is…*loud*."

Sasha leaned in.

"It's fun."

Jimmy's eyes tracked a kid zooming by, then a woman spinning effortlessly, then a guy doing a backwards glide like he was born on wheels.

"*That*," Jimmy said, pointing with his ringed finger, "looks like a fuckin' concussion waiting to happen."

Sasha laughed.

"It's skating," Sasha said with a smile, "not war."

Jimmy stared at the rink again.

"Same thing."

Sasha grabbed his arm.

"Come on."

She led him to the booth where a teen guy stood behind a counter stacked with skates and laces and a sign that said **NO FOOD ON THE RINK,** like anyone ever respected it. Sasha glanced down at their shoes.

"I need a ten. And he needs an eleven."

Jimmy immediately snapped his head to her.

"No."

Sasha didn't even look at him.

"Yes."

Jimmy pointed at the rink with skaters swerving and arms windmilling.

"I will not be doin'…*that shite.*"

The teen behind the counter lifted his brows like he'd just been challenged.

"It's easy, dude."

Jimmy turned his head slowly, his Sir Lord stare loading like a weapon.

“What did you just say to me?”

The teen, undeterred, launched into helpfulness.

“Just keep your knees bent and your chest forward—like an athletic stance. Then do small V-shaped steps, kind of like a duck walk—”

Jimmy’s frown deepened into pure annoyance.

“Fuck off,” Jimmy said flatly. “Who asked you?”

As Sasha laughed, the teen’s face tightened, offended.

“Bro, I’m just givin’ you advice. Damn, chill.”

Jimmy frowned sourly and shook his head.

“I’m not your fuckin’ bro,” Jimmy said, his tone cold and rising.

Sasha nearly burst out laughing again before slapping Jimmy’s arm lightly, mothering tone activated.

“Jimmy, behave.”

Jimmy shrugged like a mischievous kid caught poking a cat.

“What?” Jimmy said with false innocence. “Nobody asked him, Sasha.”

Sasha shook her head, laughed, took the teen's skates, and walked away. Jimmy sighed dramatically and followed, muttering like an old man trapped in a mall.

Scene Song: “Fire In My Heart” ~ Escape From New York

They sat on a bench by the rink. Sasha laced her skates with practiced ease. Jimmy stared at his like they were medieval torture devices.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said, his voice low, stubborn. “I don’t know how.”

“That’s why I’m gonna teach you,” Sasha replied, pulling tight and tying a neat bow.

Jimmy frowned.

“I don’t want to learn.”

Sasha leaned back, a sweet smile forming.

“Okay,” she said casually, “then no Teletubbies Land.”

Jimmy’s head snapped up.

“…What?”

Sasha widened her eyes innocently.

“What?” she repeated with a faint, half smile.

Jimmy leaned forward like the air had just changed.

“What’s *Teletummies Land*?”

Sasha smiled like she’d been waiting for this moment.

“A theme park here in Pelmont.”

Jimmy gasped—an actual little gasp—and his face lit up with childish wonder.

“There’s an *actual* Teletummies *theme* park?!”

“Yup,” Sasha said, pulling her other lace tight, “and we’ll go right after here.”

Jimmy’s hands came together in a quick clap, and he let out that giddy little-boy laugh—the same one that slipped out of him whenever joy hit him too fast.

“Okay!” he said immediately, like his whole personality had been bribed with candy.

Sasha laughed.

“That’s what I thought.”

He grabbed his skates and started lacing them with clumsy intensity, tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek in concentration.

“Teletummies Land,” he muttered again like he was afraid the words would disappear. “That’s…*unreal.*”

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After putting on their skates, Sasha stood up first, steady on skates like she’d done it a hundred times. Jimmy rose slower. The second he stood, his ankles wobbled, and his arms shot out slightly—instinctive panic. He grabbed the bench like it had betrayed him.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he hissed, eyes wide. “Why am I *taller* but weaker?”

Sasha laughed and grabbed his hands.

“Bend your knees.”

Jimmy frowned at her like she’d asked him to solve algebra.

“I *am* bending them.”

“No, you’re not,” she said, “you’re standing like a scared lamppost, bend.”

Jimmy bent. Instantly, he steadied a little. His eyes widened.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Sasha said with a faint and brief smile, “now stand up like you’re about to steal a base.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jimmy snapped.

“Just—athletic stance,” Sasha said with an amused smile, “like the duck walk guy said.”

Jimmy shot her a look of betrayal.

“*Don’t*.”

Sasha lightly laughed and tugged him toward the rink entrance.

“Come on, one hand on the rail.”

Jimmy clung to the rail the second his skate hit the rink, gripping it like it was the last safe thing on Earth. Sasha pointed at his feet.

“Little steps. Make a V with your toes, push out, then glide.”

Jimmy tried, and his skates slid two inches, and he jolted like the floor moved without permission.

“SHITE—” he yelped.

Sasha laughed so hard she nearly lost her own balance. Jimmy glared at her, breathing hard.

“This is humiliatin’.”

“No, it’s not,” Sasha said. “It’s adorable.”

“Don’t call me adorable on this death floor.”

Sasha held his elbow.

“Ready?”

Jimmy looked at the rink like it was a battlefield.

“No.”

Sasha smiled.

“Teletubbies Land.”

Jimmy exhaled.

“Fine.”

He pushed off the rail, and for half a second he moved. Then his feet crossed wrong, and his body pitched forward, and his arms windmilled wildly.

“OH YOU MOTHERF—”

He stopped as Sasha grabbed him around the waist and hauled him upright before he hit the ground. Jimmy froze in her grip, shaken, then looked at her with a horrified frown.

“…I almost died.”

“You almost *learned*,” Sasha corrected.

Jimmy stared.

“That’s the same thing.”

Sasha laughed and guided him again.

“Come on, Jimmy, you can do this. You’re super smart—”

“Really?” Jimmy asked, tilting his head slightly and displaying his signature full, charismatic smile, “you really think I’m smart?”

Sasha laughed.

“Jimmy, you built a whole world around yourself and got people to follow your lead. That takes brains. So yeah, you’re smart. You can *do* this, okay? Now, let’s try again, take small steps and don’t look down.”

“Well, I’m lookin’ down because if I don’t I’ll die.”

“Jimmy—trust me.”

He glanced at her, sighed, closed his eyes for a second, then nodded and tried again. He wobbled, corrected himself, and then wobbled again. This time, he stayed up. His eyes widened—surprised at his own success.

“…I’m doin’ it,” he said with a faint smile.

“Yeah,” Sasha said, proud. “You’re doing it, you’re skating.”

The music snapped into a new song with the bass thumping harder, and even Jimmy felt it in his ribs—like the whole rink had decided to wake up at the same time.

<u>Scene Song: "On Our Own" ~ Bobby Brown (From Ghostbusters II Soundtrack)</u>

A cautious smile tugged at Jimmy's mouth as he pushed a little harder on his skates. And for a second—he *glided.* Just a smooth little coast, like the floor finally agreed to let him exist. Jimmy's smile spread into something real.

"Holy shite," he breathed, laughing in disbelief. "I'm…I'm actually—"

He wobbled again, and Sasha reached for him, but he corrected himself *without* grabbing her. Then his laugh turned brighter.

"AYE!" he shouted, loud and thrilled, like a kid on a bike without training wheels. "SASHA! LOOK AT ME!"

Sasha laughed and clapped like a proud sister.

"I'm looking!"

Jimmy let go of the rail fully and skated—awkward but upright—circling in a shaky loop as his tiara glinted brightly under the colored lights. He passed a group of teens, and one of them called:

"Okay, Crown King!"

Jimmy's ego snapped on instantly. He displayed a half-smile.

"Aye," he said, breathless but proud, "bow accordingly."

Sasha almost fell laughing as Jimmy kept going—each lap steadier, each glide longer, until the fear finally loosened its grip and got replaced by something else: *joy*, real, simple *joy*.

"THIS IS ACTUALLY FUCKIN' BRILLIANT!" Jimmy called out with a happy smile as he skated past Sasha.

Sasha beamed, skating alongside him now.

"See? I told you!"

Jimmy laughed, loud and boyish, and under the neon lights—with Bobby Brown blasting and a few strangers cheering—he wasn't a cult leader. He wasn't an abandoned child. He was just *Jimmy*, having the kind of fun he *should've* gotten to have when he was eight. For once, he wasn't surviving. He was learning how to *live*.

Scene Song: "Scene Song: "Let It Whip" ~ Dazz Band

An hour in, the rink was louder than before—more people, more wheels, more swagger. The air carried that unmistakable skating-rink mix of pizza grease, sweet soda, and the faint rubbery bite of worn skate wheels cutting across polished wood. The lights kept cycling—warm reds into green, then gold—washing over the crowd like the whole place was alive and breathing to the beat. "Let It Whip" blasted through the speakers, all bounce and bass and groove, the kind of song that made people move whether they meant to or not. Shoulders rolled. Heads nodded. Hips caught rhythm mid-glide. Sasha sat on the bench near the wall, one leg crossed over the other, pizza balanced on a paper plate, soda sweating in her hand. She watched Jimmy with an expression that kept bouncing between amused and proud. Because Jimmy—somehow—looked like he belonged out there now. He wasn't just staying upright anymore. He was skating, *really* skating. Rolling faster around the rink, carving wide, confident arcs and leaning into his turns like he'd been born with wheels under his feet. Every now and then, he'd snap into a quick little twirl—not flashy, but clean—and come out of it grinning like a boy who still couldn't believe he was allowed to be this good at something this fun. And now that "Let It Whip" had kicked in, he'd started feeling himself.

Jimmy nodded his head to the beat as he skated, one hand snapping his fingers once, twice, his shoulders loosening with the groove. Every few passes, he'd throw a little extra flavor into it—a slick glide, a sharper turn, a tiny bounce in his step that was almost a dance. Not enough to make a show of himself, just enough to say he knew exactly how good he looked doing it. His tiara flashed under the colored lights. His rings caught gold and red every time he lifted a hand. And with that half-smile on his face—that smug, pleased, unmistakably Sir Lord smile—he looked like a gorgeous skating menace. At one point, he rolled past Sasha, snapping once to the beat and tossing her a smile.

"Are you seein' this?" he called over the music. "I'm fuckin' excellent."

Sasha laughed, lifting her soda in salute.

"You are feelin' yourself way too much!"

Jimmy skated backward for three seconds just to prove he could, then twisted smoothly around again with a little shoulder pop.

"Because I earned it!" he shouted back.

And then he was gone again, whipping around the rink with more speed, more confidence, more rhythm—looking less like a man learning and more like a man discovering that joy, once it finally got into his body, actually had decent balance. On his third lap, a woman skated by with a small pack of friends—late twenties, long dark hair, tan skin, denim shorts, the kind of confidence that traveled a few feet ahead of her like perfume. She glanced up, caught Jimmy's eyes, and smiled. Then she *winked***.** Jimmy's face did that immediate thing it always did when he didn't know what to do with attention: a faint, confused frown…paired

with a half-smile like his ego was trying to take credit before his nerves could panic. The woman spun—fast—then did it again, and on the third one she lifted slightly, a tiny hop that made it look like she floated. Jimmy's eyes widened like he'd just seen Tinky Winky on roller skates.

"What the—" he laughed, boyish and stunned, skidding a little to match her speed. "How'd you do *that?*"

She slowed beside him like it was easy, like gravity was optional.

"It's not hard," she said, voice sweet and playful. "You just gotta loosen up."

Before Jimmy could respond, she took his hand—light, flirty—and her fingers slid into his like she'd already decided he was fun.

"I could show you sometime," she added, her eyes bright. "If you want."

Jimmy looked away and laughed, and his cheeks went faintly red in a way that was almost offensive because it made him look even younger. Sasha saw it from the bench, and she stood up immediately, not rushed—not frantic, just *purposeful.* Her big-sister radar locked on. She rolled over on her skates, pizza plate abandoned, soda in hand, and slid right into the space between them like a referee.

Sasha rolled over on her skates, pizza plate abandoned, soda still in hand, and slid right into the space between them like a referee with sister-authority.

"Oh, nah-uh," Sasha said, smiling sweetly with danger under it. "He's taken."

Jimmy blinked.

"I'm—"

"He has a girlfriend," Sasha continued, not even looking at him now. "Her name is Kellie."

Jimmy's head snapped toward her in horror.

"Sasha—"

But Sasha was already looking back at the woman with that polite, firm smile she used when she'd decided something was over.

"So why don't you go on and skate back over there with your friends, okay?" she said. "Come on, Jimmy."

The woman's face twisted fast.

"Oh no, you *didn't*, heffa," the woman snapped.

Sasha's brows lifted, and Jimmy—Jimmy went still, *completely* still. The shift in him was immediate and frightening in the way only old danger could be. The playful blush, the

confused little half-smile, the awkward, flattered energy from two seconds ago—gone. His face emptied out into that cold, unblinking Sir Lord stare, the one that made people feel like they had just stepped into the wrong room with the wrong man. He moved in front of Sasha without even seeming to think about it.

“What the fuck,” Jimmy said softly, “did you just call my sister?”

The woman blinked at him, attitude still flaring.

“She heard me,” the woman said, rolling one shoulder, “and I don’t have a problem with sla —”

Jimmy cut her off so fast it was like the rest of her sentence got strangled in the air.

“No,” he said, his voice low and deadly calm.

Even Sasha went quiet. Jimmy took one small glide forward, enough to crowd the space, enough to make it clear that whatever game had been happening was over.

“You finish that sentence,” Jimmy continued, “and I’ll reach down your throat, rip out your fuckin’ heart and beat the living shit out of you with it right here under these fuckin’ lights.”

Then he gave a breathy, childish little laugh, quick and sharp and completely wrong for the moment. The woman’s face changed, not all the way into fear, but enough, enough for the attitude to slip. Sasha stepped in immediately, grabbing Jimmy’s arm before that old dark energy could root itself any deeper.

“Okay,” Sasha said with a faint, tight smile, already pulling him back. “Nope, you’re not going back to that. Come on.”

Jimmy didn’t take his eyes off the woman for another second, then another, like he was daring her to test him. The woman frowned, her jaw tight, but whatever she had been about to say died in her throat. She pushed off hard on her skates and rolled away toward her friends with wheels snapping against the rink floor. Jimmy watched her go, chest rising once, hard. Then he looked down at Sasha’s hand on his arm and seemed to come back to himself all at once. He let out a breathy laugh—part disbelief, part leftover adrenaline—and let her steer him off the rink. The second his skates hit the carpet near the benches, he frowned at her, offended on principle.

“Sasha, what the fuck was that?” he demanded. “Besides her bitchy attitude... she was kinda cute.”

Sasha gave him a look over the rim of her soda.

“Jimmy,” she said flatly, “that girl is a walking headache.”

Jimmy lifted a brow. “How d’you know?”

“Because I know,” Sasha replied, tone final, then she softened just a little. “She’s messy. Always got drama, always got somebody mad, always got somebody pulling a guy into

something he didn't ask for."

Jimmy frowned like he didn't enjoy being managed, but he trusted Sasha more than he trusted his own instincts. She nudged him lightly with her shoulder.

"And besides," she added, her eyes sparkling now, "you have Kellie."

Jimmy gagged so dramatically that it was almost a performance.

"Oh, for fuck's sake—"

Sasha laughed. "And if I have anything to do with it? I'm gonna make sure you two become a couple. If you aren't already."

Jimmy stared at her like she'd threatened to set him on fire.

"There is no fuckin' way," he said, voice dead serious, "absolutely not."

Sasha's brows lifted.

"Why not?"

Jimmy launched into it with full Sir Lord confidence—like he was presenting evidence in court.

"Because," he began, ticking points off with his ringed fingers, "one: Kellie has the mouth of a dockworker and the attitude of a feral cat."

Sasha briefly and lightly laughed.

"Two," Jimmy continued, "I'm not domesticated. I'm a menace. I'm a crown-wearin' liability. I'm not boyfriend material."

Sasha burst out laughing.

"You are literally describing why you two make sense," she said with a half smile and a shake of her head.

Jimmy scoffed and shook his head like *women are insane.*

Sasha stared at Jimmy with a faint frown and a brow raised for a few seconds.

"Jimmy, you—you wouldn't have *really* gotten violent with that girl, would you?"

"Aye, I would," Jimmy said with a faint frown. "I'm redeemed, Sasha, not neutered. If somebody comes for you, I will *absolutely* become a fuckin' problem."

Sasha faintly smiled and pulled him into a hug.

"Well, you done having fun or you wanna keep pretending you're the Scottish king of roller skates?" Sasha said as she leaned in towards him, still teasing.

Jimmy's mouth twitched. He shrugged carelessly, but the glow in his eyes gave him away.

"Aye, I'm done," he said. Then, quieter, like he hated admitting joy: "…It was fun though."

Sasha smiled.

"I know."

Jimmy glanced back toward the rink, watching people fly by under the lights.

"…Can we come back sometime?" he asked, almost shy, like the question mattered.

Sasha's smile warmed.

"Yeah. Next time we'll bring Ian, Spike, and his mom—"

Jimmy nodded, then she added—

"—and Samson."

Jimmy's entire face collapsed into offended disgust.

"Don't you dare bring Samson to this place," he said immediately. "It was bad enough watchin' him dance at the barbecue—"

Sasha laughed.

"—but Samson on skates?" Jimmy continued, horrified, "no, absolutely not. I'm not ready to witness a six-foot-eight former alpha glidin' around in circles like fuckin' Bambi."

Sasha lost it—laughing so hard she had to grab his arm to steady herself. Jimmy shook his head, deadpan.

"I'm serious," he muttered. "That's the kind of image that haunts a person."

Sasha laughed again and bumped his shoulder.

"Come on, you," she said, steering him toward the bench. "Let's get your shoes back on. We've got one more stop."

Jimmy's eyes perked up instantly.

"…Teletummies Land?" he asked, hopeful like a kid hearing the ice cream truck.

Sasha smiled.

"Teletubbies Land."

Jimmy's smile went wide and boyish again.

"Aye," he whispered, like it was holy. "Let's go."

Scene Song: "Make The Trap Say Aye" ~ Gucci Mane

Jimmy and Sasha had barely made it halfway toward the benches when a voice barked out behind them.

"Yo!" a voice shouted from behind them.

Both of them turned. A guy was skating toward them fast now—slightly taller than Jimmy, broader through the shoulders, face tight with anger. Behind him, the woman stood near the rail with her arms folded, clearly having already told her version of events. The guy stopped hard in front of them.

"You the one who threatened my sister?"

Jimmy didn't even blink. He just gave a careless little shrug, then looked the guy up and down with that hard, flat, signature Sir Lord stare—the one that said *this can absolutely get uglier if you want it to.*

"Aye," Jimmy said coolly. "That was me."

The guy stepped closer immediately, his jaw flexing.

"The fuck's wrong with you?" the guy snapped.

Jimmy's mouth twitched—not into warmth, but into that faint, dangerous little smile he got when trouble walked up and introduced itself.

"What's wrong with *me?*" Jimmy repeated. "Your sister ran her mouth at mine. You're lucky all I gave her was a fuckin' warning."

The guy squared up. Jimmy saw it and straightened a little, his whole body changing in that awful quick way—like old violence had just sat up in him and stretched. His eyes sharpened. His shoulders loosened. And for one brief, deeply troubling second, he looked almost excited.

"Oh, brilliant," Jimmy said softly, that smile widening just a little. "Now this I understand."

Jimmy took one step forward, but Sasha grabbed his arm instantly.

"Nope," Sasha said. "We're leaving."

Jimmy tried to pull against her grip, his eyes still locked on the man.

"Sasha—"

"*No*," Sasha said firmly.

“What?” Jimmy responded. “He’s fuckin’ askin’ for it.”

“Man, you better get the hell out of here,” the guy snapped back.

Jimmy’s head tilted, and that feral little Sir Lord grin flashed again.

“Or what?” Jimmy asked with a brow raised, a slight head tilt, and a faint half smile. “You’ll just keep shoutin’ like a bitch in rental skates?”

The guy lunged half a step, and Jimmy moved like he was about to meet him—but Sasha yanked his arm hard.

“Jimmy, we’re going. *Now*,” Sasha said sternly.

Jimmy let out a furious breath through his nose, still trying to stare the guy into a grave.

“I think we should stay,” Jimmy muttered with an excited half smile. “I can rearrange his whole fuckin’ face in under thirty seconds.”

“Nope, not today,” Sasha said, dragging him backward.

The guy kept yelling after them as Sasha hauled Jimmy toward the carpeted exit, and Jimmy twisted once to look back over his shoulder and flip the guy off. Sasha quickly got him off the rink and away from it before the old version of him could root itself any deeper.

Scene Song: “Night Time” ~ Honey I Shrunk The Kids Soundtrack

Teletubbies Land wasn’t a “theme park” the way Jimmy’s imagination had built it—no roller coasters, no towering gates, no neon skyline of rides. It was better. A huge, bright, candy-colored indoor space that looked like someone had taken a children’s TV dream and inflated it into a real room—soft green “grass” carpeting, painted sky walls, oversized flowers, smiling sun decor, and a stage dressed like a slice of the Teletubbies’ world had been lifted clean out of the telly and nailed right into Pelmont. Rows of kids sat on the grassy floor with their parents behind them, some toddlers already bouncing with impatience.

The air smelled like popcorn and juice boxes, and that specific warm, clean scent that places for children always had. Sasha walked in holding Jimmy’s wrist like she was guiding a tall, heavily accessorized kite. Jimmy stepped through the doorway…and stopped dead. His eyes widened so big it was almost comical. His mouth fell open. He inhaled like he’d just walked into Christmas morning and found the entire living room drowning in presents. Then the Teletubbies came out: Tinky Winky. Dipsy. Laa-Laa. Po. Jimmy gasped—loud.

“Holy shite,” he blurted, stunned. “They’re *here.* Tinky Winky—Dipsy—Laa-Laa—Po!”

Sasha snickered and smacked his arm without looking.

“Watch your language,” she hissed, smiling through it. “There are literally children everywhere.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes in that signature Sir Lord way—like rules were suggestions meant for other people—then shrugged as if to say *I’m an adult, I can swear if I want.* But he did lower his voice a little when he repeated, awestruck:

“…They’re actually here.”

The theme music kicked in—bright and bouncy—and the room erupted. Kids started clapping and cheering, little hands slapping together like fireworks, and Jimmy…*physically vibrated.* He did this small, child-like hop—like his body didn’t know what to do with the joy—then he took off.

“Jimmy!” Sasha hissed.

It was too late. He rushed right past her, barreled up toward the front like he had VIP access to childhood, and dropped down onto the grass criss-cross beside a little kid who blinked at him like he’d just sat down from another planet. Jimmy didn’t care. He was beaming at the stage, leaning forward, hands on his knees, his eyes sparkling. A few moms turned their heads slowly. One of them gave Sasha that tight-lipped parent look that said, *Ma’am…why is a grown man in a tiara sitting with my child?* Sasha lifted a hand and offered an apologetic smile that didn’t explain anything but somehow asked for patience anyway. Onstage, the Teletubbies waved and did their big friendly motions. The kids screamed. Jimmy screamed too—just quieter, like he didn’t want to get in trouble but also didn’t want to miss a second. The lights brightened, and that familiar, bouncy melody kicked in—simple, cheerful, impossible not to recognize.

“Teletubbies…**”** the speakers sang.

The kids erupted instantly—clapping, squealing, little voices joining in like a choir that didn’t care about pitch. Jimmy froze for half a beat. His eyes widened again, like his body had just remembered something his mind had buried under twenty-eight years of dirt and blood. Then his mouth moved before his pride could stop it.

“Teletummies,” he whispered at first—quiet, like he was testing whether he was allowed to say it out loud.

“Teletubbies…**”** the song repeated.

Jimmy’s shoulders loosened, and then—like a dam breaking—he joined in properly, under his breath at first, then louder when the kids around him didn’t judge him; they just *sang.*

“Teletummies**,**” Jimmy sang along, his Scottish accent wrapping itself around the word in a way that somehow made it funnier and cuter at the same time.

Sasha, still standing behind him, heard it and had to clamp her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Because Jimmy Crystal—Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal—was sitting on fake grass, criss-cross, singing the Teletubbies theme song with a room full of children like it

was the most natural thing in the world. The music reached that part where the voices called out their names—

“Tinky Winky!”

Kids shouted it, and Jimmy shouted it too with a smile that spread wider.

Dipsy!” the song rang out.

“Dipsy!” Jimmy and the kids sang loudly.

“Laa-Laa!”

“LAA-LAA!” he and the kids sang, with Jimmy laughing as he said it.

“Po!”

“PO!” Jimmy and the kids shouted, with Jimmy shouting it proudly like he’d just won something.

Sasha let out a quiet laugh while shaking her head. Jimmy glanced back at her for a second—caught still smiling.

“What?” he mouthed defensively.

Sasha just smiled back, soft and warm, like *this* was what she’d come all the way to the afterlife realm of Pelmont to see. Jimmy turned back to the stage, still singing, still laughing—still eight years old for the length of a theme song. When the Teletubbies did a silly dance, Jimmy clapped so hard his rings clicked together. When Po waddled over and waved at the crowd, Jimmy waved back like it was personal. At one point, Dipsy did a goofy little spin, and Jimmy’s face lit up, and then he boyishly laughed.

“Did you see that?!” he whispered to the kid beside him like they were best friends. “That was *class!*”

The kid nodded solemnly with an excited smile, as if Jimmy had just delivered an important adult fact. Sasha stood behind him with her arms folded and watched, her expression softening into something that wasn’t quite a smile and wasn’t quite sadness either—because it wasn’t just adorably cute. It was…*a missing piece.* An hour passed without Jimmy ever looking at a clock. He laughed when the kids laughed. He gasped when the Teletubbies did something surprising. He leaned forward in suspense like the plot mattered. He reacted like a kid who’d forgotten he was allowed to enjoy anything without punishment. When the show finally wrapped, and the Teletubbies waved goodbye, the kids clapped, the parents clapped, and Jimmy clapped like he was trying to keep the moment from ending through sheer force of applause. Sasha stooped down next to him and touched his shoulder.

“Okay, come on,” she said gently, “let’s go, baby bro.”

Jimmy stood up and then froze again. His eyes locked onto the side area where a line had formed—kids waiting with their parents for a quick meet-and-greet and a photo. Jimmy

stared at the line like it was a sacred pilgrimage. He turned to Sasha, and the way his face looked in that moment was so eight years old, she almost couldn't believe it.

"…Can I meet them?" he asked quietly. "Can I get a picture?"

Sasha's brows lifted. She hesitated—just a beat—then her mouth softened into a smile.

"…Yeah," she said, "sure."

Jimmy's face lit up like someone had switched on a sun inside him. He didn't even try to play cool. He went straight into line like it was the most normal thing in the world. Parents stared—hard. One woman—mid-thirties, mom-armor strong—leaned toward Sasha with a baffled frown.

"Um," she said carefully, polite but pointed. "Is…is he…in line to meet the Teletubbies?"

Sasha nodded with a polite smile.

"Yeah."

The mom blinked.

"But…he's an adult."

Jimmy's head turned slowly. That Sir Lord stare slid into place like a blade being unsheathed—calm, icy, and offended on principle.

"I heard you," Jimmy said flatly.

"Excuse me?" the mom replied with widened eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice polite in the way a threat could be polite, "are the Teletummies only for *your* kid? Or do you own the whole concept of joy?"

The mom gasped like she'd been slapped.

"*Well*! I *never*—!"

Jimmy's mouth twitched into a cold little half-smile.

"…Maybe *that's* your problem," he said.

Sasha made a noise—half laugh, half alarm—and smacked his arm.

"*Jimmy*!" she hissed. "Don't be mean!"

He glanced at her and shrugged, unbothered.

"She started it," he muttered.

Sasha pressed her lips together to stop laughing. The line moved, and a few minutes later, Jimmy was at the front. The Teletubbies stood there up close—towering and bright in the best way. Their big, friendly movements filled the space like living cartoons. Jimmy stopped, his breath caught. Up close, it was even more unreal. Tinky Winky leaned down and waved. Po bounced excitedly. Laa-Laa tilted her head. Dipsy did that playful "hello!" gesture. Jimmy's face crumpled into something almost overwhelmed. He didn't cry—but his eyes went shiny with that stunned, childlike reverence. He lifted his hand slowly and waved back.

"Hello," he said, quietly.

Then he cleared his throat like he hated how soft he sounded.

Po bounced again like she was cheering for him. Jimmy's mouth pulled into a wide smile. Sasha stepped up beside him.

"Okay," she said, pulling her phone out, "smile."

Jimmy panicked instantly.

"How d'you—what do I—do I stand like—" he started, shuffling awkwardly.

Tinky Winky put an arm around his shoulder, and Jimmy froze like a deer. Then—very slowly—he relaxed into it, because it felt safe. Dipsy waved at the camera. Laa-Laa leaned in, and Po posed like a little star. Jimmy stood in the middle wearing a tiara and rings, and a stunned smile that looked like it belonged to an eight-year-old boy who finally got something back that he didn't know he'd lost. Sasha snapped the photo. The moment the phone clicked, Jimmy let out an excited laugh—high, boyish, disbelieving.

"Holy shite," he whispered again, softer this time, like a gift he was allowed to keep, "I met them."

Sasha smiled and nudged him.

"Come on, Teletubbies superfan," she teased. "Let's go."

Jimmy looked back at the Teletubbies one more time as they waved goodbye to the next kid. Then he followed Sasha out like he was floating.

***

On the ride home, the Navigator felt warmer on the way back, like the joy had soaked into the seats. Jimmy couldn't stop talking, not in his thirty-six-year-old Sir Lord cadence. Not in his "I'm too cool for this" swagger, but in this breathless, excited, *kid voice* that kept slipping out like he didn't know how to put it away.

“They were right there,” he said for the fourth time, hands moving as he spoke. “Like—*right there,* Sasha! And Tinky Winky put his arm on me, on my shoulder. Like I was—like I was…”

He frowned as if trying to find the word.

“…Like I mattered.”

Sasha’s smile softened, proud and quiet, with her eyes still on the road.

“You do matter, Jimmy,” she said softly.

Jimmy blinked at the windshield, swallowing like that hit him harder than he expected. Then he rallied back into excitement.

“And Po,” he continued quickly, “Po was bouncin’ like she was excited to see me, and Dipsy did that little wave thing, and Laa-Laa leaned in like she *wanted* to be in the picture—”

Sasha laughed softly.

“You’re adorable,” she murmured.

Jimmy frowned automatically, defensive.

“I’m *not* adorable.”

Sasha didn’t argue. She just smiled wider.

“Okay…maybe I am…a *little*,” he said in a low voice before boyishly and lightly laughing.

Jimmy stared out the window, still glowing.

“…Can we go again?” he asked after a beat, quieter. “Sometime?”

Sasha’s voice stayed warm.

“Yeah,” she said. “We can go again.”

Jimmy nodded once, satisfied, like that promise was something he could carry. Then he leaned back in the seat and let out a long, happy breath. For once, no fear followed it—only the strange, unfamiliar peace of a man who had finally gotten to be a child again...in a world that didn’t punish him for it.

Scene Song: “You Gotta Be” ~ Des’ree

By the time they got back to Sasha’s place, the sky outside had mellowed into that dusky, blue-gray calm that made Pelmont feel like a lullaby. Streetlights glowed soft and warm

along the sidewalk, and the air still carried a faint trace of summer—clean, quiet, safe. Jimmy walked beside Sasha like he always did when he felt good and didn't want to admit it—hands in his track suit pockets, his tiara and rings catching the porch light every time he moved. Six blocks wasn't anything, but he wanted to walk her to her door anyway, like the night was something he didn't want to end too quickly. They stepped inside, the house still and cozy, and Sasha headed toward the kitchen on autopilot—ready to set her keys down, ready to grab water, ready to start her usual wind-down routine. But Jimmy stopped her. Before she could even turn, he reached out and pulled her into a warm, sudden hug—tight, grounded, pure sibling. It wasn't his usual quick, joking half-hug either. It had weight. It took Sasha aback so hard that she froze for a second. Jimmy's voice came out low, rough, honest.

"…I love you."

Sasha blinked and pushed back just enough to look up at him, her eyes wide.

"What?" she said, like she wasn't sure she heard him right.

Jimmy looked away immediately, embarrassed—like the words tasted too exposed on his tongue. He gave a little breathy laugh and scratched the back of his head.

"I said I love you," he repeated, quieter but firmer, like he was daring himself to stand in it this time.

Sasha's mouth softened into a touched little smile, her brows lifting with that faint, emotional frown she got when something hit her heart unexpectedly. Jimmy swallowed and kept going before she could interrupt—like if he stopped, he'd lose his nerve.

"And…I'm serious," he said, eyes flicking back to hers. "Today—learnin' to roller skate… having fun at it…"

He shook his head once, almost disbelieving.

"Then going to see the Teletummies live?" he added.

His voice cracked into a small laugh that wasn't sad—just overwhelmed.

"Sasha…this has been the *second* best day of my *entire* life," he admitted, "and I have you to thank for it."

Sasha stared at him, stunned, her whole face softening. Jimmy's face pulled into that familiar half-smile, but this time it wasn't arrogance. It was gratitude trying to wear a mask and failing.

"I know after everything I've done... I don't deserve a second chance at...*any* of this. At life."

He exhaled slowly.

"But you gave me one anyway. And I…I thank you every day for that."

Sasha's eyes shone, but she held it together. She pointed at him with mock sternness.

“Boy,” she said, teasing through the emotion, “didn’t I tell you once before about that thank you shite?”

She said it exactly how *he* said it—shite, crisp and Scottish, like she’d borrowed his accent just to mess with him. Jimmy froze. His eyes widened in offended delight.

“…Did you just say *shite?*” he asked, half laughing, half scandalized.

Sasha half smiled.

“What? I’m bilingual now. English and Jimmy.”

Jimmy barked a laugh and shook his head.

“That was…that was actually not bad,” he admitted with a smile. “Terrifyin’, but not bad.”

Sasha laughed, swatting his arm.

“Go home.”

Jimmy stepped back, still smiling, then playfully tapped her chin with his fist—gentle, affectionate, like a brother who didn’t know what to do with tenderness, so he wrapped it in swagger.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Sasha lifted a brow. “Tomorrow?”

Jimmy’s smile went mischievous.

“Aye,” he said, already backing toward the door. “Bright and early. In your house. With a *big* fuckin’ bowl of cereal.”

Sasha laughed instantly.

“And what are you gonna be doing?” she asked, already knowing.

Jimmy opened the door, pausing on the threshold like he had to deliver the punchline properly.

“Watchin’ the Teletummies,” he said, voice reverent, “with the glee of a man who saw them live and in person *just* the day before.”

Sasha laughed so hard she had to put a hand to her chest.

“You are a mess.”

Jimmy shrugged like it was a crown he wore proudly.

“Aye,” he said with a half-smile. “But I’m *your* mess.”

Sasha's smile softened again.

"Yup, and I wouldn't have it any other way," she said gently. "Now, go on and get home safe."

Still smiling, Jimmy nodded once—then slipped out the door, leaving Sasha standing in the warm quiet of her kitchen, smiling as the sound of his footsteps faded down the walkway like something precious she never wanted to lose.

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple (End Theme)" ~ 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple Soundtrack

Jimmy didn't go home, not yet. The warmth of Teletubbies Land was still stuck to him like sunlight, his body still carrying that loose, boyish glow—like he'd just discovered what it felt like to exist without being hunted. But then the guilt found him again, quiet and patient, like it always did. He turned down the street toward Ian's place instead. He used the same kind of confident stride he always did when he didn't want anyone to see he was nervous. When he stepped inside, he heard the soft murmur of tea voices and laughter, with Ian's calm baritone in the middle of it. Jimmy paused in the doorway—and his stomach dropped. Cathy was there. Jane Ji. Matthew. They were gathered around Ian's kitchen like they belonged there, mugs in hand, the kind of casual comfort that Jimmy still didn't understand.

And when Cathy looked up and saw him—her face hardened instantly. It wasn't even loud. It wasn't even loud. It was worse than loud. It was *pure*. Her stare hit him like cold water to the chest—utter, complete hatred, like the memory of Earth still lived behind her eyes, and it had teeth. Jimmy stopped dead. His smile—whatever faint, leftover happiness he'd been carrying—collapsed right off his face. Jimmy's eyes went wide and guilty, almost childlike, like he'd been caught standing in a place he didn't deserve.

"...Hello," he said quietly.

Cathy sucked her teeth, slow and sharp, like the sound itself was an answer.

She didn't look away. She looked *through* him. Then she turned to Ian without even blinking.

"We'll see you tomorrow," she said to Ian, her voice clipped.

Jane Ji's mouth tightened into something pained, controlled. Matthew didn't glare the way Cathy did—but he didn't soften either. He just looked at Jimmy like Jimmy was a storm cloud that had wandered into the room. None of them said goodbye to Jimmy. They moved past him as a unit—Cathy leading, Jane Ji behind her, Matthew last—stepping around Jimmy like he was a stain on the floor. The door shut behind them with a quiet finality. Jimmy didn't move for a second. His throat worked. His jaw tightened. He looked down at the tile like it was safer than looking at Ian. Ian, at the counter, didn't rush him. Didn't scold him. Didn't pity him. He just turned slightly, calm as always, eyes steady.

“Hey,” Ian said gently with a faint, brief smile. “How was your day?”

Jimmy let out a breath that sounded like it got dragged out of him.

“It was goin’ good,” he muttered. “Until…that.”

Ian nodded once, like he’d expected it.

“They were over for tea,” Ian said, reaching for the kettle like keeping his hands busy would keep the air from getting too heavy. “They drink it. I don’t. But they do.”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched faintly, but the guilt stayed. Ian continued, voice quiet, matter-of-fact.

“They were talking about George and Tom. About how much they miss them, it helps to talk about the grief that they feel so they do.”

That sentence hit Jimmy in the ribs. Jimmy shut his eyes briefly, face pinching, then he opened them again with a deep frown.

“...I wish I could make it right,” Jimmy said in a low voice.

Ian turned toward him a little more.

“You can’t make the past not have happened,” Ian said, “but you can stop adding to it.”

Jimmy blinked rapidly, as if his eyes were drying out from holding something back. Ian’s voice softened—not indulgent, just real.

“You have redemption now, Jimmy. That matters. Not because it erases anything. But because it changes what you do next.”

Jimmy swallowed.

“Does it?” he asked, bitter and honest. “Because Cathy looks at me like I’m still that—”

He stopped like he couldn’t even say the word *monster* in Ian’s kitchen without tainting it. Ian set the kettle down and leaned lightly against the counter.

“Cathy is allowed to feel what she feels,” Ian said, “so are Jane Ji and Matthew.”

Jimmy’s eyes flashed—anger at himself, not at them.

“I know.”

Ian’s gaze held him.

“But *you*,” Ian continued, “are also allowed to become something else. Even if some people can’t look at you and see it yet.”

Jimmy stared at the floor, his jaw working like he was chewing on a truth that tasted like rust. Ian cleared his throat gently, changing gears—not avoiding the subject, just giving Jimmy a rope out of the pit.

Scene Song: "Father Figure" ~ George Michael

"Come here," Ian said, nodding toward the counter. "Help me with something."

Jimmy looked up immediately, suspicious.

"With what?"

Ian raised a brow, not even trying to hide the faint amusement on his face.

"Food," he said. "I thought we'd try something terrifying."

Jimmy squinted at him.

"...You're trying to cook?"

"Yes," Ian replied, deadpan. "And I'd like to survive it."

That got a scoff-laugh out of Jimmy before he could stop it. He pushed himself off the counter and wandered closer, slow and wary, like Ian might still reveal this was some kind of trap. The kitchen light was warm. The kettle sat quietly now. Ian had set out a cutting board, a knife, onions, peppers, garlic, a loaf of bread, butter, cheese, and a carton of eggs. Jimmy looked from the spread to Ian.

"What is all this?"

Ian slid the knife across the counter toward him.

"*This*," Ian said, "is what I call bonding."

Jimmy stared at the knife like it had personally insulted him.

"That's what *you* call it."

Ian handed him an onion.

"Chop."

Jimmy looked down at the onion. Then back up at Ian with a slow, offended blink.

"Are you trying to make me cry?"

Ian half-smiled.

“If you do, you can blame the onion.”

Jimmy huffed through his nose, but he picked up the knife. His hands hesitated at first—precise, careful, but unsure in a way that had nothing to do with clumsiness and everything to do with the fact that this kind of control had never been taught to him without fear attached to it. Ian noticed that immediately. He stayed close enough to help, but not close enough to crowd.

“Chopping is different from *stabbing*,” Ian said mildly.

Jimmy looked up at him with a faint frown and a brow raised. Ian laughed once, quietly and briefly.

“That was funny,” Ian said, “you don’t have to pretend it wasn’t.”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched before he could stop it.

“When you cut,” Ian said, calmer now, reaching for the onion, “you curl your fingers in. Like this. Keep the tip of the knife down. Let it rock.”

He demonstrated once, then handed it back. Jimmy copied him, awkwardly at first.

“Good,” Ian said, simple and steady.

Jimmy went still for half a second. Praise still did that to him. Especially praise from a man. Especially from a man old enough, calm enough, solid enough to feel like something his nervous system wanted to call father before his pride could interfere. He looked down at the onion again and kept going. The first few cuts were uneven. Then less uneven. Then almost decent. Ian nodded once.

“See?” Ian said with a faint smile.

Jimmy frowned faintly at the onion pile.

“It still looks a bit like—shite.”

“It looks edible,” Ian said, smiling more, “that’s usually enough.”

Jimmy let out another low huff that was almost a laugh. They worked in that rhythm for a minute. Ian passing things over. Jimmy chopping, the kitchen filling slowly with the smell of onion, pepper, and garlic. It was all so aggressively normal that Jimmy didn’t know what to do with half of the feelings it was producing in him. Ian reached for the peppers.

“Your turn again,” Ian said.

Jimmy took one of the peppers, then paused.

“So this is what people do?” Jimmy asked.

Ian glanced at him.

“What do you mean?”

“*This*,” Jimmy said, gesturing vaguely with the knife, “stand around in kitchens, cut vegetables, and talk absolute shite at each other while food happens.”

Ian’s expression softened.

“Yes,” he responded, “this is what people do.”

Jimmy looked down again, his jaw shifting.

“Huh.”

They chopped in silence for another few seconds.

“Seems fake,” Jimmy said, quieter now.

Ian didn’t answer right away. He cracked eggs into a bowl, whisked them with a fork, then slid the bowl toward Jimmy.

“It only seems fake,” Ian said, “when you’ve spent a long time living without it.”

That one landed. Jimmy stared at the eggs like they’d personally become more meaningful. Ian nudged the bowl a little closer.

“Whisk.”

Jimmy took the fork and whisked too aggressively. Ian watched for two seconds, then reached out and gently touched Jimmy’s wrist.

“Less like you’re trying to punish it,” Ian said before lightly laughing.

Jimmy flinched, tiny, quick, involuntary. Ian felt it and immediately took his hand away.

“Sorry,” Ian said easily, no weight in it, no pity, “try again.”

Jimmy swallowed, nodded once, and did, slower this time.

“Better,” Ian said.

Jimmy’s shoulders loosened by a fraction. Ian melted butter into the pan. The kitchen gave a soft hiss. He handed Jimmy the spatula.

“Now pour.”

Jimmy obeyed, his eyes narrowed in concentration as the eggs spread golden across the pan.

“What are we making?” Jimmy asked.

“Omelets. Toast. Nothing dramatic.”

Jimmy glanced at him sideways.

“That sounds disappointingly normal.”

“That’s the goal,” Ian said after lightly laughing.

Jimmy looked at the pan again.

“Normal,” Jimmy repeated, as if trying the word in his mouth. “You say that like it’s some kind of luxury.”

Ian leaned one hip against the counter.

“It is.”

Jimmy didn’t answer that; he just watched the eggs set around the edges.

Ian nodded toward the bread.

“Butter both sides.”

Jimmy looked at him like he was deranged.

“*Both*?”

“Yes.”

“That seems excessive,” Jimmy responded.

Ian gave him a flat look.

“Do you want it to taste good or not?”

Jimmy picked up the butter knife.

“This is manipulative,” Jimmy said.

“Probably,” Ian said before smiling faintly.

That got a real laugh out of Jimmy, sharper and brighter than the others. By the time the food was actually coming together—omelets folded, toast browning, cheese melting into the pan—the room felt different. *Softer*, less like Ian was hosting a damaged young man and more like a father was letting his son stand beside him and learn something ordinary with his hands. Jimmy was the one who noticed it first, and it made him uncomfortable in a deep, old way, not bad uncomfortable, not unsafe, but worse, maybe, because it was good. Because Ian wasn’t correcting him to shame him. He wasn’t watching him for failure, he wasn’t using God like a stick, and he wasn’t making affection conditional on obedience. Ian was just… *there—present*, *patient,* and *kind*. Jimmy stood at the stove, flipping the toast with more confidence now.

“You know, this would’ve been useful information before now,” Jimmy said.

“Cooking?” Ian responded as he looked over at Jimmy.

Jimmy shrugged one shoulder, still staring at the pan.

“All of it.”

That sat between them for a second. Then Ian moved beside him and set two plates down.

“Well,” Ian said lightly, “you’re here now.”

Jimmy looked at the plates, then at Ian, then back down. Something in his face shifted, not dramatically but just enough. Jimmy cut the toast in half and slid it onto the plate. Ian spooned the omelet over. Jimmy looked at the finished result with a strange kind of seriousness, like he had participated in some ritual he didn’t yet understand. Ian handed him a fork.

“Taste it,” Ian said.

Jimmy took a bite, chewed, and then raised his brows.

“All right,” Jimmy said reluctantly. “That’s actually...pretty good.”

Ian half-smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

Jimmy gave him a look.

“Well, it should taste good since I made half of it,” Jimmy said before shrugging.

“You buttered bread,” Ian replied.

“I cut the onions,” Jimmy responded, looking up at Ian with a faint frown.

“Heroic,” Ian responded with a solemn nod.

Jimmy laughed again, and this time it stayed a little longer. They ate standing there at the counter, no rush, no performance, just the soft clink of forks and the quiet hum of a house at night. After a minute, Jimmy asked:

“Did anyone ever teach you this?”

Ian glanced down at his plate.

“No,” he replied, “not really. I learned because I had to.”

Jimmy nodded slowly, as if that answer meant more to him than it should have. Then came a few seconds of silence. Then Jimmy said, almost grudgingly:

“You’re good at this father shite.”

Ian looked at him almost with a surprised stare. Jimmy immediately frowned like he regretted the sentence the second it left his mouth.

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Ian’s expression softened into something warm enough that Jimmy had to look away.

“I know,” Ian said.

That made the back of Jimmy’s neck hot for some reason. Jimmy set his fork down, and the room went quiet around him in a different way then—not empty, but *charged*, like the air had shifted. It was as if something inside him had turned its head toward a thought before he consciously understood it. His eyes flicked toward the window, toward the outside, toward somewhere else.

“I have to go,” Jimmy said.

Ian looked up, surprised.

“Now?”

Jimmy nodded once, serious.

“Yeah. I’ve got somethin’ I need to do.”

Ian studied him.

“What is it?”

Jimmy shook his head slightly.

“I’d rather not tell you,” Jimmy replied. “I want you to hear it from Cathy tomorrow...if she tells you.”

Ian’s expression changed at that—quietly, deeply. Not shocked. Not smug. Just something close to pride. He stepped forward and pulled Jimmy into a hug, a real one. Immediately, Jimmy froze. His whole body locked for one awful second, the old wiring flaring—father, touch, brace, wait—but Ian didn’t tighten to control him, didn’t grip to own him, didn’t hold him like a correction. He just held him, steady, warm, *safe*. Jimmy stood there in it, bewildered by it. Then, slowly—awkwardly—Jimmy hugged him back, not gracefully, not naturally, but honestly. Jimmy’s arms tightened just a little, like he was learning the shape of safety in real time and didn’t quite trust his own hands around it. Ian let go first. Jimmy blinked fast and stared at the floor with a faint, confused frown, like he didn’t know what expression was supposed to come next. He cleared his throat.

“...Right,” Jimmy muttered, “I’ll see you.”

Ian nodded gently.

“Go,” he said, “and whatever it is you’re about to do—do it as the man you are now.”

Jimmy looked up. Something settled in his face, then he nodded once and left.

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple (End Theme)" ~ 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple Soundtrack

The boardwalk in Pelmont was quiet in that serene, late-night way—ocean air drifting in slow, steady breaths, streetlights glowing soft along the planks, the world calm like it had finally forgiven itself. Jimmy stood at the wooden railing with both hands wrapped tight around it, his tiara catching the light like a ridiculous little crown of penance. He closed his eyes. A faint pressure gathered behind them again—not pain, not exactly. More like the air itself leaning in. Waiting. Jimmy drew one slow breath through his nose and let it out just as carefully. Then he made his mind go still, the way Sasha's always seemed to, like stillness was a door you could actually open if you meant it, and then he reached—not with his hands. With something inside him that had never really been used for anything gentle. He pictured George. He pictured Tom, not as symbols, not as guilt, and not as punishment, but as *people*.

He held their faces in his mind with careful reverence, like he was afraid to disrespect them even in thought. Like if he got it wrong, the universe and the afterlife itself might punish him for even trying. Within seconds, the air shifted. Two shapes gathered where there had been nothing, not smoke, not light–*form*. Like the universe had been holding their outlines somewhere just out of sight, waiting for someone to finally call their names the right way. Then they were there. George's face hardened instantly. Tom's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing like he was already ready to fight. Tom looked Jimmy up and down with open disgust.

"You've got some nerve," Tom snapped.

George's eyes flickered to the tiara like it offended him personally.

"What the hell is this?" George growled. "What are you doing?"

Jimmy opened his eyes and swallowed. His grip on the railing tightened until the rings on his fingers clicked softly against the wood.

"I didn't bring you here to start shite," Jimmy said, his voice low and careful. "So if you're gonna hit me, do it now and get it out of your system."

Tom took a step forward, shoulders set. George didn't move, but the anger coming off him rolled hot and steady.

"You dragged us here for what then?" George said. "So you can feel better about yourself?"

Jimmy flinched—tiny, involuntary—but held his ground.

"No," he said simply. "I brought you here for them."

Tom’s frown deepened.

“For who?”

Jimmy’s throat worked. He forced the words out like swallowing glass.

“Cathy,” he said. “Jane Ji. Matthew.”

George’s expression cracked for half a second—pain trying to break through the rage—then hardened all over again.

“Don’t say their names,” he hissed.

Jimmy nodded once.

“Aye,” he muttered. “Fair.”

He exhaled slowly, then turned to face them fully, the tiara still catching the light like a joke he didn’t deserve.

“They miss you,” he said, “bad.”

Tom stared at him, suspicious.

“So why didn’t they—”

He stopped there, like the sentence didn’t have an ending that made sense. Jimmy’s eyes flicked away toward the dark water.

“They don’t know how,” he said quietly, “not like this.”

George’s stare sharpened.

“And you do?”

“In this afterlife realm of Pelmont,” Jimmy said, voice rough, “you can... reach.”

Jimmy hated how small it sounded. How childish it sounded, but it was the truth. Sasha had called it thought-intention. He hadn’t believed in anything for a long time—until he felt the universe answer him.

“I’m not askin’ you to forgive me,” Jimmy said quickly, bluntly, like he needed to get it out before he lost his nerve. “Although I wish you both would. I’m not askin’ you to like me. I’m not even askin’ you to stop wantin’ to spit in my face.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. George’s jaw clenched. Jimmy swallowed hard.

“I’m askin’ you to go see them,” Jimmy said. “Because they deserve that.”

Tom gave a bitter little scoff.

“Why is this your problem?”

Jimmy swallowed again.

“Because *I* made it *their* problem,” he said, “on Earth.”

The wind moved through the boards like a hush. A gull cried once somewhere in the dark, then fell silent again, like even it had decided to mind its business. Jimmy held their stares—raw and steady.

“I know what I did,” Jimmy said. “I know what I was.”

Tom’s bitterness flared hot.

“You don’t get to know it *now,*” Tom snapped. “Not after—”

“I know,” Jimmy cut in, his voice firm but not defensive. “I know I don’t deserve anythin’ from you.”

His throat worked. When he spoke again, his voice dropped lower. Quieter. More honest.

“In the world of flesh,” he said, “I was sick. Mentally. Emotionally. I was... warped.”

He exhaled through his nose like he hated the sound of his own explanation.

“Trauma. Madness. The virus. The end of the world. None of it excuses me. But it does explain how I became that.” He shook his head once, sharply. “I wasn’t born that way. Circumstance and sinister influences made me into it.”

Tom didn’t soften, but something in his expression shifted, conflicted—like his anger had run into a wall of truth and didn’t quite know what to do with it. Jimmy’s eyes glistened faintly, but he didn’t let tears fall, not here, not in front of them. He refused to give them anything that could look like a performance.

“Here,” Jimmy said, tapping his chest once, “I’m not that man anymore. The moment I got here to this realm, I got stripped down to what was underneath what I was on Earth.”

George’s mouth tightened.

“And what’s underneath?” he asked. “A better monster?”

Jimmy flinched again, tiny and fast, but he stayed standing.

“A boy who should’ve died at eight,” Jimmy said quietly. “And somehow didn’t.”

The words hung there in the salt-thick dark. Tom stared at him for a long, tense moment, like he was trying to find the lie hidden in the sentence. Jimmy exhaled slowly.

“I’m sorry,” Jimmy said. “I’m genuinely sorry, and I know sorry doesn’t fix a fuckin’ thing.”

Jimmy looked between them, forcing himself not to look away.

“But I’m askin’ you—just once—give me the chance to do one thing right.”

George’s eyes burned with distrust. Tom kept reading Jimmy’s face like a document he didn’t want to sign. Seconds passed, then Tom gave one stiff, reluctant nod, like the motion cost him.

“...Okay,” Tom said.

George shot him a look that plainly said, *are you serious?* Tom didn’t look away.

“We decide after,” Tom said tightly, “after we see them.”

Jimmy nodded once, like that was the most he had any right to receive. He led them through the night—quiet streets, soft lamps, still air—until they reached Cathy’s house. Jane Ji and Matthew’s car was still there. The lights were on, the curtains were half-drawn. Jimmy slowed at the edge of the yard like his body physically refused to carry him any closer. He looked at Tom and George, expression serious.

“I’m not goin’ in,” Jimmy said. “They don’t want to see me.”

George’s eyes narrowed.

“And you do?”

Jimmy’s jaw flexed.

“I want them to have you two back,” Jimmy said simply.

No ego, no drama, just the truth. Tom watched him for a second, then nodded and turned toward the house. George hesitated—only for a beat—then followed him. They knocked, and a moment passed. Then the door opened. Cathy appeared—and froze. Her face changed so fast it almost hurt to watch. Confusion. Disbelief. Terror. Hope. All of it colliding at once.

“...Tom?” she whispered, like her voice didn’t trust itself.

George stepped forward.

“Hey,” George said, rough, like the word had to climb out of his chest.

Cathy’s hand flew to her mouth.

Her knees nearly buckled. Jane Ji appeared behind her and stopped dead too, her eyes widening before her whole face crumpled with shock—like her grief had been holding its breath for years and had finally, finally exhaled. Matthew stepped into view—and the sound that came out of him wasn’t even a word. Just a strangled breath of disbelief, like his body couldn’t decide whether to scream or cry, and then the porch became a collision of people, arms wrapped tight, and sobs broke loose. Cathy held Tom’s jaw between her palms like she was afraid he’d vanish if she blinked. Jane Ji pressed her forehead to George’s shoulder, shaking. Matthew stood there, stunned for one second too long, then folded into them like someone finally letting the world hold him up.

Across the yard, Jimmy stood in the shadows and watched through the open curtain. A faint half-smile touched his mouth, not pride, not ego, just quiet relief. For one moment—for one small, impossible moment—he had done something right, and that was enough. Then the smile faded, because even from here, he could feel it. Their joy wasn't forgiveness. Their reunion didn't erase what he had done, and painful as it was, he accepted that. Jimmy turned away before the sight of it could cut him open any deeper. Then he walked home alone under the Pelmont streetlights—solemn but steady, ocean air cool against his face, a redeemed man, but still a man carrying consequence and still learning how to live with both.

Chapter 6

Morning in Pelmont didn't feel like morning on Earth. No alarms. No dread. No sense that the day was something you had to survive. Light came through Sasha's blinds in clean stripes like the sun had learned manners here. Jimmy sat on the sofa at the end of her bed like he belonged there—because, somehow, he did. He had his black tracksuit on, and his rings and tiara on. A bowl of cereal was balanced on his knee while the Teletubbies bounced across the screen, loud and bright and stupidly safe. As Jimmy boyishly laughed at a twirling dance that Tinky Winky did, Sasha was asleep behind him, curled into her blankets like the world couldn't reach her. For a few minutes, Jimmy let himself pretend that was true. Then the air shifted. Not a sound—more like pressure. A tug behind his eyes. A presence pressing against the inside of his skull like a hand on a door that wasn't locked so much as *waiting*. *Jimmy.* He froze mid-spoon. His eyes flicked to Sasha, then back to the TV, then down at his cereal like it had suddenly become suspicious.

"Come over," Jimmy heard Ian's voice say.

Jimmy swallowed the cereal in his mouth.

"Why?" Jimmy responded back, his irritation snapping up on instinct—an old defense, reflexive as blinking.

"Just come," Ian replied, calm as ever. "*Now."*

Jimmy stared at the Teletubbies like they might answer for him. Then he set the bowl down carefully on the coffee table in front of him, like it was fragile. He rose, quiet on purpose, and glanced back at Sasha once. Something in his face softened—gratitude, maybe. Or fear of losing the one place he felt allowed. Then the softness vanished. He walked out like a man heading toward judgment.

Scene Song: "We Fall Down (But We Get Up)" ~ Donnie McClurkin

Ian's house smelled like tea and something warm—*normal*, too normal. Jimmy stepped into the kitchen doorway—and stopped dead. They were there. Cathy. Jane Ji. Matthew. And behind them—like the universe and the afterlife had decided to make today as heavy as possible for Jimmy—Tom and George, standing close together, faces hard, had their eyes locked on Jimmy like they were prepared for him to try some slick Sir Lord nonsense. Jimmy's spine went rigid. His hands flexed at his sides, rings flashing under the overhead light. His jaw set. His eyes sharpened into that familiar stare—the one that used to make grown men shut up without being told. He backed up half a step without meaning to. Not because he wanted to hurt them, but because his body remembered what it meant to be cornered. Ian's voice cut through the tension, steady and low.

“Jimmy,” he said gently. “No one’s here to hurt you.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Tom said before letting out a humorless laugh.

George didn’t laugh. He just stared like Jimmy was a stain that refused to wash out. Cathy’s expression was worse than anger. It was *revulsion*. The kind that comes from remembering what you begged the world not to let happen—then watching it happen anyway. Jimmy opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Ian nodded toward the table.

“Come in. Sit down,” Ian said.

Jimmy didn’t move, and he kept his slightly wide and slightly cautious eyes on Cathy.

Jimmy opened his mouth.

“Shut up,” Cathy said in a flat, final tone. “I’m going to say what I’m going to say, and you are going to *take* it. You understand me?”

The *Sir Lord* in Jimmy twitched a little—ready with a remark, a smirk, a defense. But instead, he swallowed what she said like poison.

“Yeah,” Jimmy whispered.

Cathy’s nostrils flared.

“On Earth,” Cathy said, “you took people apart like they were *nothing*. Like we were props in whatever broken story you were telling yourself.”

Jimmy’s eyes dropped to the floor.

“You looked at us like we existed to prove your point,” Tom cut in, in a bitter tone.

“You made games out of *suffering*,” George chimed in before flexing his jaw.

Jane Ji’s voice came softer, and somehow that made it worse.

“Since being here, I’ve repeatedly dreamed of the first time I heard your footsteps,” Jane Ji said quietly, “and during my sleep, during my dreaming, my stomach would turn. Because your footsteps meant somebody was about to disappear.”

Silence settled. Thick. *Heavy*. A kettle ticked softly as it cooled. Jimmy breathed in—and it shook on the way out. He lifted his eyes, and for once, there was no cleverness in them. No charm. No Sir Lord performance. Just a man stripped down to the part that hurt.

“I know,” Jimmy said, his voice raw. “I know. I know I did it.”

Jimmy’s hands curled into fists at his sides—not from anger. From the effort of standing there and not running.

“And I can stand here and tell you I was sick,” Jimmy continued, his voice cracking slightly, “and I *was*—m*entally* and *emotionally*. I was *warped*. But I’m not using it like a shield, because it doesn’t give you back what I took.”

“So why are you *here*? Why’d you come in here like you’re entitled to *breathe* the *air*?” Tom snapped as his eyes narrowed.

Jimmy flinched, not because it was unfair, but because it was accurate. He glanced at Ian for half a second, like he needed permission to stay standing. Ian gave him nothing but a calm look of: *keep going.* Jimmy turned back to Tom.

“I’m here because last night I did one decent thing,” Jimmy said quietly, “and I realized decent doesn’t erase vile.”

Jimmy’s eyes flicked to the cups, the table, the normal room—like normality offended him.

“And I realized that I can’t hide from the worst of what I did and still pretend I’m changin’,” Jimmy said, swallowing hard. “You lot are…you’re the ones I did the most damage to.”

Cathy’s face didn’t soften, but her jaw trembled once—tiny, involuntary. Jimmy’s voice dropped into something smaller, not weak, just honest.

“I don’t expect forgiveness,” Jimmy said. “I don’t expect kindness. I don’t expect you to look at me and feel anything but disgust.”

Jimmy’s throat tightened.

“But I just wanted you to know I’m not going to hide from it anymore.”

Jimmy looked at Cathy directly.

“I’m *sorry*,” Jimmy said, “not like ‘sorry, please absolve me.’ I mean—”

Jimmy stopped as his breath hitched.

“—I mean, I’m sorry in the way that I’d fuckin’ cut pieces off myself if I could hand you back what I took. But I *can’t*,” Jimmy continued.

The room stayed still.

“Why did you bring us back?” George asked, slow and rough.

Jimmy blinked at him as George’s eyes burned.
“You brought us back…for them?” George added.

“Aye,” Jimmy replied, nodding once.

“So you didn’t do it to be forgiven,” Tom said before tightening his mouth in anger.

It wasn't a question. It was an assessment. Jimmy didn't answer right away—because the truth was uglier, because a part of him *wanted* forgiveness like *oxygen*, but he didn't want to steal it.

"No," Jimmy said finally, and it sounded like it cost him. "I did it because they deserved it, and because I owed them one moment that didn't taste like loss."

Cathy stared at him for a long time. Then she stood. The chair scraped back, loud as a snapped nerve. Jimmy's whole body tensed like he was bracing for impact. Cathy walked toward him with purpose—no softness and no hesitation, and Jimmy didn't back up. She stopped right in front of him. Up close, her eyes weren't just angry. They were exhausted.

"I'm not here to make you *feel* better," Cathy said in a low voice, "and I'm not about to pretend what you did didn't *happen*."

Jimmy swallowed hard, nodding once, the movement tight like it hurt. Cathy's jaw worked, and her voice thickened—still sharp, but cracked at the edges.

"I *loved* them," Cathy said, meaning George and Tom without even looking back. "I loved them and you took them from me like it was *nothing*. And I carried that hate like it was the only thing I had left that kept them close."

Her nostrils flared as tears gathered but she refused to let them fall.

"I *hated* you," Cathy admitted, bluntly, "I hated you so much it became…*routine,* Like breathing."

Jimmy's eyes clouded with tears that eventually streamed from his eyes, but he didn't wipe them. He felt at that moment that he didn't deserve the dignity of pretending he wasn't breaking. Cathy inhaled through her nose, steadying herself like she was choosing something.

"Last night," Cathy said, "when I opened that door…"

Cathy's throat bobbed and she looked away for half a second, then back at him.

"That was the first time in a long time I felt anything that wasn't rage."

There was silence right then, as if the house held its breath. Cathy's gaze sharpened again.

"So listen to me," Cathy said, pointing a finger at his chest—not accusingly but claiming the moment. "I'm not forgiving you because you *earned* it. You *didn't*."

Jimmy nodded once.

"I'm forgiving you," Cathy continued, her voice rising just slightly, "because I'm *tired*. I'm tired of dragging you around in my spirit like a corpse. I'm tired of giving you that much space in my life."

Jimmy's lips parted and a sound tried to come out, but it broke into breath. Cathy stared him down like a warning.

“This isn’t me saying we’re friends,” she said. “This isn’t me saying I *trust* you. This is me saying I’m letting the hate go, for *me.*”

Jimmy’s face folded into a deep frown as a ragged, shivering inhale broke through him. Cathy held his gaze.

“*But*,” she added, voice lowering, “you *are* getting a chance.”

Jimmy froze. Cathy’s expression stayed stern, but something in it softened—not warmth, not comfort—*resolve*.

“A second chance,” she said, “to prove you *meant* what you just said, to prove you’re *not* that man anymore.”

Jimmy’s tears slipped free again as he nodded.

“I will,” Jimmy tearfully whispered. “I *swear* I will.”

Tom stepped forward next, shoulders tight, eyes still sharp.

“I’m not about to sit here and act like I’m okay,” Tom said. “I’m not. I’m still angry. I might *be* angry for a long time.”

Jimmy nodded.

“You’ve got every right,” Jimmy said through light tears with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Tom stared at him like he wanted to punch him and hug him at the same time, which confused even Tom. Then Tom exhaled hard.

“But I’m done letting you own my head,” Tom said. “So yeah…I’ll—give you a chance.”

Tom paused.

“*One* chance,” Tom said, his voice roughening, “but *don’t* make me regret it.”

George came forward more slowly. His hands were clenched, but his eyes weren’t only fire anymore.

“I don’t forget,” George said, “and I sure as *hell* don’t forgive like it’s a magic trick.”

Jimmy’s chest rose and fell, shaky.

George’s jaw flexed.

“But I saw what you did,” George said, nodding faintly toward Cathy, Jane Ji, and Matthew. “You didn’t have to bring us back for them, but you did.”

He stared at Jimmy for a long beat, then stepped closer.

“Don’t waste the part of you that finally woke up,” George said quietly.

Jane Ji's tears finally spilled. She swiped them away with the heel of her hand like she was angry at them.

"I'm not doing this for you," Jane Ji said, her tearful voice small but firm. "I'm doing it because I want *peace*."

Jimmy nodded, tears streaming freely now.

"You deserve it," Jimmy said through light tears.

Matthew's voice came hoarse.

"I…don't know how to stop being angry overnight," Matthew admitted. "But… I don't want to be chained to it either."

Matthew stepped forward, swallowing hard.

"So yeah," Matthew said. "I—forgive you."

Jimmy looked away from them and down at the floor, standing there like his body didn't know how to hold what was happening to him and around him. His shoulders shook, and he made a sound that wasn't a sob so much as a surrender—like something in him finally unclenched after decades. When he finally spoke through his sobs, it was barely a whisper.

"I don't know how to say this without sounding like a fuckin' *idiot*."

Tom scoffed.

"Then *don't*," Tom replied.

That almost—*almost*—made Jimmy laugh. Jimmy blinked hard and looked up again as more tears streamed.

"Thank you," Jimmy said tearfully anyway, "not for lettin' me off the hook. But just…for lettin' me try."

Cathy held his gaze a second longer, then she extended her hand. Jimmy stared at it like it was a miracle he didn't deserve. Ian didn't move, he didn't guide. He just watched, calm and present, and slowly, Jimmy reached out and he and Cathy's hands clasped. Cathy's grip was firm, grounding, *real.*

"You say you're not who you were," she said, her voice low and cracking with emotion, "but you're not *entitled* to who you want to be either."

Jimmy swallowed, nodding.

"You *earn* it," Cathy finished, "day by day."

Jimmy tearfully nodded, like he'd spend the rest of his existence proving it. Tom followed—stiff, reluctant—but he offered his hand too. George did the same, slower, heavier, like it

meant something to him. Jane Ji hugged Cathy first—tight—and then, after a breath, stepped forward and hugged Jimmy too, quick and trembling. Matthew followed, awkward but sincere. Jimmy stood in the middle of it like a person being rebuilt in real time. Then Ian's hand settled on Jimmy's shoulder—gentle, solid. The last of the hatred in the room finally stopped being a weapon and became something softer: A boundary. A chance. A *beginning*. At that moment, he wasn't forgiven like a fairy tale. He was forgiven like a *choice*. It wasn't peace. It was terms. And Jimmy was determined to honor them.

Scene Song: "A Hidden Life Theme" ~ A Hidden Life Soundtrack

For a few seconds after the hug, the room stayed *still*—not awkward, not tense, just…*full*. Like the air had been holding its breath for years and had only just remembered how to let go. Jimmy pulled back first, blinking hard. His eyes were red and wet, and his face was flushed like he was embarrassed his body had betrayed him in front of witnesses. He wiped his tears away aggressively with the heel of his hand, like the tears had personally offended him.

"All right," Jimmy muttered, his voice hoarse. "That's enough of that."

Tom huffed a laugh under his breath. Cathy didn't smile, but her eyes softened by a fraction, the way a locked door softened—not open, not welcoming, but no longer trying to slam on your fingers. Jimmy cleared his throat again. His shoulders rose and fell once, a slow breath—like he was bracing himself to ask for something he didn't deserve.

"I—" Jimmy started, then stopped.

Jimmy's jaw worked like he was chewing on pride. He tried again, quieter, steadier.

"Can I do somethin'?" Jimmy asked.

Everyone went still again. Cathy's eyes narrowed instantly out of suspicion, guarded instinct, habit.

"Like what?" Cathy asked, flat.

Jimmy swallowed, his gaze dropping to the counter like the granite might help him think. When he looked back up, the Sir Lord swagger was there—barely—but it was muted, softened by sincerity, like he was wearing the tiara, but the tiara didn't own him.

"I want to make it…official," Jimmy said, "not forgiveness—" he added quickly, shaking his head once. "I know that's not a switch you just flip. I'm not askin' you to pretend you feel anythin' you don't."

Tom's brows lifted slightly. George's posture eased half an inch. Jimmy's voice dipped lower—serious, respectful.

“I’m asking if you’ll let me offer an olive branch,” Jimmy said, “a real one, somethin’ that says…we’re not livin’ in the same war anymore.”

Jane Ji’s lips parted like she was surprised by how carefully he was choosing his words. Cathy didn’t respond right away. She just stared at him—reading him the way she’d always read danger. Jimmy held her gaze, he didn’t flinch, he didn’t get defensive. He just stood there and took the weight of her silence. Finally, Cathy exhaled through her nose, slowly.

“…Okay,” Cathy said, suspicious even in agreement. “What is it?”

Jimmy nodded once, like he’d just been allowed to breathe.

“I want you all to come to dinner,” Jimmy replied, “tonight.”

Tom blinked.

“Dinner?” Tom said with a faint frown and a brow raised.

“Aye,” Jimmy said, “at my sister Sasha’s house. Six o’clock.”

“Why Sasha’s?” George asked with a frown.

Jimmy’s mouth tightened, like he knew this sounded like an ambush.

“Because she’s…*home*,” Jimmy said simply. Then he clarified, voice gentler, “and because I want this new beginning to start the way normal people start things, not with speeches, not with blood, and not with some dramatic shite.”

Jimmy’s eyes flickered at each.

“Just…breaking bread,” Jimmy said. “Sitting in the same room, eating the same food, me proving to you—quietly—that I’m not that man anymore.”

“And how exactly does that prove that?” Cathy asked, her gaze sharpened.

Jimmy didn’t get offended. He nodded as if the question was fair.

“It proves I’m not hidin’ from you,” Jimmy said. “It proves I’m not askin’ forgiveness and then disappearin’ into comfort. It proves I can sit at a table with the people I hurt and not make it into a performance.”

Jimmy’s voice dropped again.

“It proves I can be…*real*.”

Jane Ji’s expression shifted. Her eyes glistened a little, but she didn’t cry. She just nodded once, small and decisive.

“…Okay,” Jane Ji said almost softly.

“Yeah. Okay,” Matthew followed, quiet but sincere.

“Fine,” George hesitated a beat longer, then gave a short nod.

“We’ll come,” Tom said while rubbing his jaw, still wary, but he didn’t refuse.

Cathy stayed silent the longest, her eyes pinned to Jimmy like she was still deciding whether this was a trick. Jimmy didn’t push. He *waited*. Finally, Cathy spoke, low and careful:

“*Six*,” Cathy said. “We’ll be there. But don’t expect me to suddenly act like we’re…friends.”

Jimmy shook his head immediately.

“I wouldn’t insult you by expectin’ that.”

After a beat, Jimmy faintly half-smiled, the faintest hint of boyish relief.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said, his voice cracking again—quiet, reverent, “*all* of you.”

Jimmy glanced at Ian.

“*And* you,” Jimmy added, like it mattered deeply that Ian had witnessed this, “*especially* you.”

Ian’s expression warmed, not proud in a loud way—but proud, the way a father is when a kid finally chooses the hard right thing.

“I’ll make sure they have the address,” Ian said gently with a faint half smile. “You focus on —being ready.”

Jimmy nodded once.

“Yeah,” Jimmy responded. “Six.”

Jimmy backed toward the door like he didn’t want to take up too much space. And then he left.

***

Later, Sasha’s kitchen smelled like coffee and morning—warm, soft, safe. When Jimmy walked in, he didn’t swagger like usual. He moved like a man walking carefully with something fragile in his hands. Sasha looked up from the counter and immediately clocked his face.

“Oh…” she said softly. “Jimmy. Baby bro—what happened? I thought I’d wake up this morning and see you in front of the TV watching Teletubbies but I didn’t.”

Jimmy's mouth opened, and for a second he didn't speak—like if he did, the emotion might spill out again, then he exhaled.

"They forgave me," he said.

Sasha froze.

"What?" she asked, her eyes widening.

Jimmy's face shifted into something bright, trying to break through the shock on his face, not an adult smile, not a Sir Lord smirk, something in-between, like a man and a little boy sharing the same mouth.

"They forgave me," he repeated, his voice a little louder, like he needed to hear it again to believe it.

Sasha's entire expression softened, and her eyes filled instantly.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Jimmy…"

He nodded fast, his eyes sparkling now, almost disbelieving.

"Cathy and Tom and George—" he said, stumbling over the names like they were sacred. "Jane Ji. Matthew, all of them."

He shook his head once, breath catching.

"And I asked them…to come to dinner," he added quickly, like he was proud and terrified at the same time, "tonight—six—here."

Sasha's hands flew to her mouth.

"…You did *what?*" she asked, half-laughing in shock.

Jimmy lifted his chin—his Sir Lord instincts flaring automatically.

"Aye," he said, like it was obvious. "I'm startin' this new shite properly."

Sasha let out a laugh that turned into a choked sound.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you," she said, and before he could retreat, she rushed around the counter and hugged him tight.

Jimmy stiffened instantly, offended on principle.

"Sasha—" he grumbled, face squishing into her shoulder, "quit that."

She hugged him harder.

"Nope."

He tried to push her off but failed because he didn't actually want her to stop.

"This is—this is humiliatin'," he muttered with a faint smile, his voice muffled. "I've got a reputation."

Sasha pulled back just enough to look at his face, smiling through tearful eyes.

"Your reputation can go to hell," she said warmly. "You did something brave."

Jimmy blinked fast, like he was trying not to cry again.

"…Aye," he said, almost in a whisper before clearing his throat aggressively, "well, don't get used to it."

Sasha laughed as Jimmy smiled. Then he gave up pretending he wasn't happy and let out a short, boyish laugh—soft and disbelieving.

"They're comin'," he said again, almost to himself with an excited smile.

Sasha squeezed his shoulder.

"Then we're going to feed *everybody*," she said, already switching into mission mode, "and we're going to make it a real welcome, a real start."

Jimmy nodded once with a half smile.

"Yeah," he responded. "A real start."

Scene Song: "Waiting To Exhale" ~ Whitney Houston (Instrumental)

Six o'clock in Pelmont didn't feel like a time. It felt like a threshold. Sasha's house was warm with it—the buttery smell of roasted turkey and gravy, sweet cinnamon drifting off candied yams, something herby and peppery coming off the greens. The whole kitchen held that Thanksgiving kind of heat, the kind that made the windows fog a little at the edges like the house was breathing. Jimmy stood at the dining table like it was a battlefield he'd agreed to cross without armor. He wasn't in a tracksuit. That alone felt like a miracle. He wore fitted black jeans and a black shirt under a sharp dark blazer, clean and simple—adult clothes. Proper clothes.

The kind of outfit that said *I came here on purpose.* But then you got to the details: the tiara catching the light like a mischievous secret, the rings flashing on both hands, gold chains resting at his collarbone—no crucifix anymore, just metal and intention. He held a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other, staring down like they were puzzle pieces that might explode.

“Right,” he muttered, arranging them, then rearranging them. “Do the spoons go—outside? Or inside? And why does that feel like a trick question?”

Sasha, across the room, was checking the oven timer and pretending she wasn’t watching him hover over the place settings like a little kid trying to build a Lego set without the picture. She finally turned, saw his face, and laughed softly.

“Jimmy,” she said, walking over.

She didn’t tease him. She just put both hands on his shoulders—steady, warm—like she was calming down a startled animal.

“Deep breath. In…and out,” she said.

Jimmy blinked at her hands like they were a foreign concept, then obeyed with a stiff inhale.

“Again,” she said.

He did it again, shoulders dropping a fraction.

“Good,” she murmured. “Now—put them where you think they should go. This isn’t Buckingham Palace. It’s dinner.”

He eyed the forks like they’d personally offended him.

“It’s still stressful,” he grumbled.

Sasha smiled.

“You’re doing fine.”

He nodded once like he didn’t believe her, then—finally—he looked up and caught her staring at him with a smile.

“What?” he asked, suspicious.

Sasha’s eyes swept his outfit.

“You look really good. I’m impressed, baby bro.”

Jimmy half smiled and then he did that thing where he looked away like he couldn’t help it, and then laughed under his breath like his ego was a living creature he had to feed.

“Aye,” he said, smoothing his blazer like it was casual. “I thought I’d dress for the occasion. Make it look like I’m takin’ it seriously.”

“You *are* taking it seriously,” Sasha said gently.

Jimmy’s eyes flicked back to hers, the brightness there for a beat—then he scoffed like he had to regain control of his own feelings.

“Tomorrow it’s back to tracksuits,” he declared. “I’m not gettin’ addicted to fuckin’ pants with buttons. That’s a slippery slope.”

Sasha laughed. “Oh my God.”

“And don’t judge me,” he added, pointing a ringed finger at her like a warning. “I’m fragile.”

“You’re a mess,” she said, still laughing.

“And yet,” Jimmy said, his eyes narrowing with that Sir Lord charisma, “somehow I’m also brilliant.”

Sasha smacked his arm lightly.

“Go set the napkins, your Highness.”

He rolled his eyes with exaggerated dignity.

“Yes, Mom,” he joked with a smile.

The doorbell rang. Jimmy went still. Not frozen—just…paused, like the moment caught up to him. He swallowed hard, then dragged in another controlled breath.

“I’ve got it,” she said while patting his shoulder once.

But Jimmy was already moving, quick and tense, hands flexing at his sides. He didn’t *hide* behind her, but he stayed close enough that she felt the current of nervous energy coming off him. Sasha opened the door. Ian stood there first, calm and composed in that quiet way he had, holding a bottle of something like a peace offering. Behind him—Cathy, Tom, Jane Ji, Matthew, and George. Cathy’s eyes landed on Jimmy immediately. Jimmy held her gaze without blinking. His mouth tightened, then loosened into something careful—his face trying to be respectful and brave at the same time.

“Hello,” Jimmy said, low.

Cathy didn’t smile. But she did something new. She nodded, not warmth, not affection, but acknowledgment. Tom stepped in next, eyes flicking over Jimmy’s outfit. George did the same, less subtly. Jane Ji’s brows lifted. Matthew actually blinked twice like he thought he was hallucinating the blazer.

“All right then,” George said slowly, half to himself. “Look at you.”

Jimmy faintly smiled and then lightly laughed.

“What?” Jimmy asked, already defensive. “It’s a jacket. I haven’t joined a monastery.”

Ian’s lips quirked.

“Come on in. Shoes wherever. Food’s almost ready,” Sasha said as she shut the door behind them.

More footsteps—Spike and his mother followed, then Kellie, then Samson, who ducked his tall frame through the doorway like the ceiling had insulted him.

"Look at you, man!" Samson exclaimed while looking at Jimmy with a full smile.

Jimmy stared at him and then at Samson's grin and then frowned with a faint smile of his own.

"Don't start," Jimmy warned.

Samson lifted both hands in surrender, still smiling.

"I'm not starting anything. I'm just appreciating."

Spike's mother, Isla, looked Jimmy up and down with a pleased little hum.

"The boy cleaned up," Isla said to Spike with a faint smile and a nod, resulting in Spike briefly letting out a light, breathy laugh.

Jimmy blinked at her, caught off guard—then did his little boyish laugh, quick and embarrassed. Kellie sauntered in last, eyes sliding over Jimmy's outfit like she was taking inventory.

"Well damn," Kellie said with a half-smile. "Look at Sir Lord James Bond."

Jimmy's eyes narrowed with amusement. He leaned slightly toward her, all casual posture, hands talking—palms open, fingers moving like punctuation—his expression bright-electric in that way that always made people look twice.

"Aye," Jimmy said, his voice smooth. "Is that a compliment or are you just…strategically motivatin' me because you think you're cashin' in later?"

Kellie choked a laugh and shoved his shoulder.

"Jimmy—shut up."

Jimmy laughed, delighted with himself.

"That's a yes then."

Cathy watched the exchange with guarded eyes, but something in her face shifted—like she wasn't amused, exactly, but she was…studying. Measuring. Seeing how he moved when he wasn't trying to be terrifying. Sasha guided everyone to the table. Plates. Glasses. Serving dishes that made the whole table look like it was dressed for a holiday. Jimmy hovered at one end, hands twitching like he didn't know where to put them but then he took his seat like he was taking a vow. As everyone settled, there was that first thick moment—when forks hadn't clinked yet, when nobody wanted to be the first one to speak and break whatever fragile peace had formed. Then Sasha set down the gravy boat with a gentle thud.

"Okay. Dig in," Sasha said brightly.

And like that, the spell broke. Plates were passed. Serving spoons dipped. People started tasting. Spike's mother made a noise like the Lord himself had personally blessed the mac and cheese.

"Oh yeah," Isla said. "Sasha, this tastes amazing."

Jane Ji nodded, her eyes briefly widening.

"Yeah, this is…really good."

Matthew took a bite of turkey and actually exhaled like he'd been holding tension in his jaw.

"And the turkey is too," Matthew said. "This tastes like…home."

"Thank you," Sasha said with a shy smile.

Jimmy, beside her, sat up straighter like he'd been appointed official spokesperson.

"Sasha's *the* best cook in Pelmont," Jimmy announced, pointing his fork at the spread like it was evidence, "and I'm sayin' that as a man who's been spiritually transformed by her yams."

"Oh my God," Sasha said with a laugh.

"No," Jimmy insisted, deadly serious. "Those yams are glorious. If anyone *ever* tries to insult my sister's cooking, I'm gonna have to get violent."

Cathy immediately darted her briefly widened eyes up at Jimmy while Tom coughed a laugh into his drink. Jimmy looked at Cathy and then Tom with a quick half-smile.

"I'm kidding," Jimmy added, then shrugged, "mostly."

George eyed the tiara and the rings again, then finally said what everyone else was thinking.

"So," George began carefully, "the…tiara."

Jimmy's brows lifted. He sat back, one arm draped over the chair like he was hosting the table, hands moving as he talked—little flicks of his fingers, a slow roll of his wrist, charisma sliding back into place like a familiar coat.

"What about it?" Jimmy asked.

"Why do you still wear it?" Jane Ji asked before glancing at Cathy, then back at Jimmy.

Jimmy blinked like they'd asked why the sky existed.

"Because it's cool," Jimmy replied simply while cutting a piece of his turkey. "And because I like pretty shite."

Sasha covered her smile with her napkin like she was trying not to laugh.

“And *those*?” Matthew asked as his eyes flicked to the rings.

Jimmy glanced down at his hands like, *obviously.*

“Also cool. Also pretty. Also mine,” Jimmy said before letting out a light, boyish laugh.

“Fair enough,” Tom said as his mouth twitched into the smallest smile.

Cathy didn’t smile though, but her eyes stayed on Jimmy longer this time, like she was trying to understand how someone could be both…silly and sincere. The conversation shifted, easier now. They talked about the barbecue. The music. The ridiculousness of grown adults playing Spades like it was warfare.

“I still can’t believe you were line dancing,” Samson said as he leaned back, grinning.

“Don’t,” Jimmy scowled with a faint frown and a faint half smile.

“I think you did pretty good out on the floor,” Ian said to Jimmy with a smile.

“Don’t encourage me,” Jimmy said with a half smile while pointing his fork at Ian.

“He got rhythm, I’ll give him that,” Kellie said with a half smile of her own.

“You should’ve seen him on skates too,” Sasha chimed in, teasing.

“Skates?” Cathy asked, her head lifting slightly.

Jimmy’s face lit up instantly—boyish pride busting through the adult suit like it couldn’t help itself.

“I learned,” Jimmy said, and it came out like *a brag and a confession.* “I nearly died, but I learned.”

“Were you any good on the rink?” Tom asked with a brow raised.

Jimmy gave Tom that bright, charming smile—with his eyes alive and his hands talking.

“Aye, I’m annoyingly good at things when I decide I’m going to be,” Jimmy said. “It’s a gift.”

George laughed under his breath. And then—Tom asked, hesitant but real.

“Ian said you played basketball at the barbecue too?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy replied, his smile tugging wider, “apparently I’ve got game, as Sasha put it.”

Sasha lightly laughed.

Then right then, Jimmy glanced up at Tom with a faint, half smile.

“You want to play on the court sometime?” Jimmy asked almost hesitantly like he wasn’t sure if he should or not.

Tom looked up at him and studied him, still guarded. Jimmy’s smile slowly faded.

Scene Song: “In Your Eyes” ~ Peter Gabriel

“I mean, only if you want,” Jimmy said. “I mean—I just—”

Jimmy stopped and shrugged with his eyes dropping to his plate like a kid backing away from a request.

“Never mind, it’s fine,” Jimmy said in a low tone.

The table went quieter. Tom looked down, pushing food around, conflicted. Jimmy’s mouth tightened, disappointment flashing across his face before he smothered it. Then Tom looked back up.

“Yeah,” Tom said, still cautious, but sincere. “Maybe this weekend.”

Jimmy’s eyes lifted fast. A faint smile—soft, grateful—pulled at his mouth.

“Okay,” Jimmy said quietly.

Sasha watched it happen with something warm in her chest and didn’t say a word, like she didn’t want to scare the moment off. Then Cathy—still sharp, still blunt—tilted her head slightly.

“So,” Cathy said, her eyes on Jimmy, “the Teletubbies.”

Jimmy froze mid-chew. Cathy’s voice wasn’t cruel, but it had an edge.

“Are you actually into that…or was that part of your Earth…sociopathy?”

The word landed like a slap. Jimmy’s face tightened. A real wound flickered there—quick and exposed. His gaze darted to Sasha, then Ian, instinctively searching for a guide rail. He swallowed. Then, while blinking a few times, he set his fork down carefully like he didn’t trust his hands not to shake.

“It’s real,” Jimmy said, low and honest. “I like them.”

Cathy held his gaze. Jimmy’s voice roughened, but he kept going.

“My life stopped when I was eight years old,” Jimmy said, “and the last normal thing I remember is…watching them.”

Jimmy shrugged, embarrassed.

“So sometimes I’m…” Jimmy gestured vaguely at himself, a helpless little flick of his hand. “*This*. A grown man who still gets excited like a child and still likes to play like a child because…that child never got to *finish being* a child.”

Jimmy’s eyes dropped again.

“I know I—lack maturity,” Jimmy admitted quietly. “It’s not something I’m proud of. I’m trying to change it. I just…I don’t know how.”

The table stayed silent. Then Cathy did something that shocked *everyone.* Her expression softened—not fully, but enough to feel like sunlight coming through a crack.

“*Don’t*,” Cathy said.

Jimmy looked up. Cathy’s tone was quieter now, almost careful.

“Don’t change that part of yourself.”

Jimmy blinked, stunned. Cathy continued, her voice still firm but warmer.

“That part of you is…innocence,” she said. “It’s *pure*, it’s—*goodness*, and you need that. If you’re going to stay on the *right* path instead of the wrong one—hold on to the part of you that can still be *innocent*.”

Jimmy stared at her like he didn’t have a category for that kind of mercy. Then his mouth pulled into a faint half-smile, a frown still lingering—touched, overwhelmed, yet trying to keep it contained.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said softly.

Cathy nodded once, serious. The smallest half-smile tugged at her mouth—barely there—then she looked down at her plate and took a bite like she hadn’t just changed the entire temperature of the room. A few beats later, Samson broke the tension the only way he knew how—like a wrecking ball wrapped in warmth.

“So,” Samson said, chewing, “when you gonna stop wearing tracksuits and dress like this more often?”

Jimmy’s head snapped toward him with immediate offense before faintly and briefly half-smiling.

“Never,” Jimmy said flatly.

Kellie laughed.

“Jimmy,” Sasha said before lightly laughing.

“I’m serious,” Jimmy insisted with a faint smile. “Tracksuits are freedom. Tracksuits are democracy. Tracksuits are—”

“Comfort,” Ian cut in, amused.

“*Exactly*,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and smile, pointing at Ian like he’d made a brilliant argument.

“But you look good like that,” Samson smiled.

Jimmy displayed his signature ego-driven smile as his ego perked up.

“Yeah,” Jimmy responded. “I know. Sasha was *supposed* to take me shopping.”

Jimmy turned to her with a contrived glare.

“You promised me new threads, sis.”

“I’ve been busy,” Sasha said, laughing. “I had an entire dinner to cook, your *Highness*.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Jimmy said before he leaned back and laughed, his eyes narrowing with fake betrayal.

And then—Cathy, quietly, almost casually—finally made her first real joke.

“Well,” Cathy said, looking between Jimmy’s tiara and his outfit, “if you do go shopping… make sure your clothes match your tiara and all those rings.”

The table blinked. Then George laughed first. Then Tom. Then Jane Ji. Then even Matthew. Sasha burst out laughing, her hand over her mouth. Jimmy’s eyes widened, delighted—like he couldn’t believe she’d joined the banter. His face lit up bright-electric, hands moving as he answered—full Sir Lord charm, but sweet.

“Aye!” Jimmy said, smug as hell. “Because I’m *not* about to look like a royal disaster! I’m a coordinated *monarch*!”

“A coordinated monarch,” Kellie said before laughing.

“*See*? Cathy *gets* it! She’s got *taste*!” Jimmy exclaimed as he pointed at Cathy, grinning.

“Don’t push it,” Cathy said as she shook her head with a faint smile, her eyes warmer now.

“I won’t,” Jimmy said, his smile softening before he lightly laughed.

And right there—between gravy and laughter and a joke that sounded like normal life—something settled, not perfect, not erased. Just…*new.*

***

Scene Song: “Waiting to Exhale” (Instrumental — soft/slow score)

Sasha's home felt warmer now that dinner was done—warm in that quiet, afterglow way, like the walls had absorbed laughter and decided to hold onto it. The table behind Jimmy was a scatter of proof: half-empty glasses, napkins folded wrong, a serving spoon abandoned like it had finally clocked out. Outside the windows, Pelmont's night sat calm and clean, the streetlights breathing gold onto the driveway. Sasha stayed a few steps back on purpose, letting Jimmy do the seeing-off like he'd insisted—like being the one at the door made it more official. Made it *real.* He stood there in his outfit that wasn't a tracksuit for once—black blazer, black everything—tiara still catching the light like a stubborn signature.

Rings flashing when he moved his hands too much. Which, of course, he did. One by one, people filtered out with satisfied murmurs and soft goodnights. Spike's mum patted Sasha's hand with that *"you fed us well"* smile. Jane Ji gave Sasha a quick hug that didn't turn into a speech, just a squeeze and a nod. Matthew thanked her twice like he couldn't help it. George offered Jimmy a short, firm nod—still guarded, but no longer sharp. And then the last little pocket remained.

Cathy. Tom. Ian. Samson. The air changed in the doorway the way it always did when the *big* people were the only ones left—when the room stopped being "company" and became "*truth*." Tom stepped onto the porch first. Halfway down the step, he paused. He didn't turn around dramatically. He didn't soften into some movie-perfect grin. He just looked back at Jimmy with a faint, small half-smile—nothing that screamed *we're mates now,* nothing that promised anything more than what it was. Just a half smile that said: *tonight was decent.* Tonight didn't hurt. Jimmy got it instantly. It hit him in the chest like a quiet blessing.

He looked away the way he always did when something landed too close to his heart—like he was trying to laugh it off before it could become a feeling. A light, breathy laugh slipped out. He sighed loudly, nodded once, then looked back at Tom like he'd recovered his composure. Tom's hand lifted—slow, a little hesitant—offering the handshake like it cost him something. Jimmy's smile faltered into a faint frown of surprise. For a second he just stared at the hand like it wasn't real, like it might vanish if he blinked wrong. Then he half-smiled. Carefully. Like he was holding something fragile. He took it. The handshake was firm. Simple. *Human*. The kind of thing Jimmy hadn't realized could feel like forgiveness without anyone saying the word. Tom squeezed once and let go.

"All right," Tom murmured—almost nothing at all.

Jimmy nodded, throat tight in a way he'd never admit.

"Aye," Jimmy managed, his voice rougher than he wanted.

Tom turned and went down the steps, shoulders loosening as he walked into the night. Cathy approached next. She didn't move like Tom. She moved like a woman who'd survived the end of the world and still had the posture of someone who refused to be fooled. She stopped right in front of Jimmy at the doorway and held him with her eyes. Jimmy's body did something subtle—his shoulders drew in half an inch. His hands went still. He didn't flinch, but there was a nervousness there, small and undeniable, like his nervous system remembered

her hatred and didn't trust the calm. Cathy stared at him long enough that Jimmy's throat bobbed with a hard swallow. Then she spoke.

"Don't forget," she said, low and steady, "keep the innocence."

Jimmy's mouth twitched into a faint half-smile—automatic, protective—then it faded into something more serious. Something that said: *I heard you.* Something that said: *I'm trying.*

He nodded once.

"I will," Jimmy said quietly.

Cathy didn't give him a hug. She didn't pat his cheek. She didn't turn into anyone else. She just gave him a small, final look—like a warning and a blessing braided together—and stepped past him into the night. Samson came up behind her like a completely different kind of weather. He filled the doorway with that big, easy presence—tall, wide, too alive to ever feel like a threat in this realm, even if Jimmy's memories still occasionally insisted otherwise. Samson's smile was bright, almost boyish in its own way.

"Well," Samson said, grinning, "tracksuit king…you did it."

Jimmy's brows lifted with faint offense.

"I'm not—"

"It was a nice dinner," Samson continued, cutting right through him, genuinely pleased. "I'm glad I came."

Jimmy stared at him for a beat, then rolled his eyes like the compliment irritated him on principle. He looked down, huffed out a laugh, and finally looked back up with that half-smile that always carried a little bite.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I'm glad you came too."

Samson's grin widened.

"Now I can say I had dinner with a *fuckin'* former infected alpha," Jimmy added with a half smile.

Samson barked out a laugh, deep and warm, and Jimmy laughed with him—sharp, bright, relieved. Samson reached out and gave Jimmy's shoulder a friendly pat that would've made Jimmy bristle a week ago. Tonight, it just made him breathe out like a person.

"See you around, Sir Jimmy," Samson said.

Jimmy nodded, still smiling.

"Don't get any ideas about skates again," Jimmy responded.

Samson laughed all the way down the steps. Then there was only Ian. Ian didn't immediately step outside. He leaned against the doorway like he belonged there. Like he wasn't leaving until the moment was done properly. His face held a proud smile—quiet, steady, almost tender. Jimmy squinted at him with a faint frown and a half-smile, already suspicious.

"What the hell are you lookin' at?" Jimmy asked, trying to make it a joke before it could be anything else.

Jimmy lifted his hand, gesturing vaguely at himself like he was presenting a display.

"Is there somethin' on my face? Or are you just admirin' the fact that I didn't wear velour for once?"

Ian chuckled under his breath, eyes never leaving Jimmy's.

"I'm just looking," Ian said.

Jimmy's brow rose higher.

"Why?"

Ian's smile softened, and the pride in it stopped being funny.

"Because I'm proud of you," Ian said simply. Then, after a beat—like he'd decided not to water it down—he added: "I'm proud of my *son*."

Jimmy froze, his brows lifted and his eyes widened—just slightly. Like he hadn't heard the words properly.

"My *what?*" Jimmy asked, his voice rough and confused, like the word was foreign in his mouth.

Ian nodded once, calm as ever.

"My son."

Jimmy stared at him. The bright little Sir Lord smile drained clean off his face, replaced by a confused frown that wasn't anger, wasn't disgust—just…*lost*. Like he didn't know what to do with that kind of tenderness. Like his body was searching for the old script—sarcasm, deflection, swagger—and finding nothing that fit. Before Jimmy could force a joke out of himself, Ian stepped forward, and hugged him. It was warm. Solid. Not a quick pat. Not a performative gesture. A father-son hug that didn't ask permission from Jimmy's trauma. It just showed up and held him steady. Jimmy blinked a few times, his frown deepening—because something in his chest shifted and he hated that it was happening in front of someone who could *see* him. His hands hovered for a second at Ian's back like he still didn't know if he was allowed. Then he hugged Ian back, a *real* hug this time, with his arms tightening and his eyes closing briefly like his nervous system finally let go.

"Thank you," Jimmy whispered, so low it was almost nothing, like he didn't want anyone but Ian to hear it. Like if the universe heard it, it might take it away. Then, after the smallest

pause, his voice caught again: "...Dad."

The word felt strange leaving Jimmy, not wrong, just *unfamiliar*, tender in a way that made Jimmy's chest tighten. For one brief second, Jimmy's face pinched with that same confused little frown he always got when something good hit him too directly. Like some part of him expected the word to be rejected, expected Ian to flinch, or laugh, or correct him, but Ian didn't. Ian just held him a little tighter, and that was all it took. The tightness in Jimmy's face eased, and when he breathed again, it came out shakier—but calmer. Like the word had found the right place to land after all. Ian pulled back, still smiling softly.

"I'll see you this weekend," Ian said.

Jimmy nodded, staring down at the floor, his lips pressed thin as he fought to keep his composure together. He didn't look up right away. He didn't trust his face. Ian stepped back onto the porch. Turned. Started down the steps. And as Ian walked away, Jimmy finally lifted his eyes —one tear—just one—had slipped down from the corner of his eye, catching the light before it tracked along his cheek. Jimmy didn't wipe it, not immediately. He just stood there in the doorway of Sasha's house—tiara glinting, rings flashing, shoulders tense with emotion he didn't know how to wear—watching Ian disappear into the gentle Pelmont night like something magical had just happened to him. And he didn't have a joke for it, not this time.

Scene Song: "A Hidden Life Theme" ~ A Hidden Life Soundtrack

The moment the front door shut and the night swallowed the last of Ian's footsteps, the guesthouse seemed to exhale. The dining room light still glowed warm over the table, but the noise was gone—no overlapping voices, no plates clinking, no Samson laughing like thunder. Just the soft hum of the fridge and the faint, distant hush of Pelmont outside. Jimmy walked back into the kitchen and found Sasha and Kellie mid-laugh—leaned against the counter like two women who had survived something together and were finally allowed to joke about it. Kellie's eyes cut to Jimmy the second he came in, and her mouth curled.

"A'right," Kellie said, stretching the word like she was already halfway out the door. "I'm gonna head out."

She stepped in and hugged Sasha, quick and familiar, like a sisterhood thing more than a friendship thing.

"Thanks for tonight," Kellie said. "It was…actually nice."

Sasha smiled, warm and tired in a good way.

"You're welcome, Kellie. Be safe."

Kellie pulled back and turned to Jimmy with a half-smile that was *pure* trouble—flirty, amused, and just smug enough to make him want to roll his eyes. Jimmy gave his little Sir Lord laugh—breathy, proud, like he was humoring the entire world. Kellie's gaze flicked down his blazer, up to the tiara, then back to his eyes.

"Look at you," she murmured. "Out here pretendin' you're civilized."

Jimmy half-smiled with a faint frown.

"Yeah," he said, "try not to faint."

Kellie laughed softly, bumped his shoulder with hers as she passed, and walked out like she owned the hallway. The door clicked shut behind her. Silence again. Jimmy turned to Sasha, who was already gathering plates like her hands were on autopilot. He stepped closer, half-hugged her with one arm in that awkward-but-earnest way he did when he didn't want to be *too* emotional.

"I'll do the dishes," he offered. "You clear the table."

Sasha didn't even look up at first. She smiled, shaking her head as if the idea itself was sweet.

"Absolutely not," she said. "You had a full day of…forgiveness, and redemption, and dinner-hosting, and emotional breakthroughs. You're done. Go home. I'll handle the cleanup."

Jimmy watched her for a beat. And the smile he'd been wearing—small and tired—started to fade. Something serious slid into place behind his eyes as he studied her face like he could read the ache in it.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I can help. You shouldn't have to do it alone."

Sasha finally looked up. Her half-smile came back, but it was softer now—almost sad.

"I'm fine," she said gently. "Really."

Jimmy didn't move. He just stared at her, like his whole soul was asking the question again without words. Sasha tried to keep her face light, but the room had gone too quiet for pretending. Jimmy stepped in and hugged her properly this time—arms firm around her shoulders, chin dipping near her hair, like he was clinging without wanting to admit he was clinging.

"I'll always be your adorable baby wolf," Jimmy said in a low voice, close to her ear, "I'll always be your baby brother. You know that, right?"

Sasha's throat tightened a little. She nodded, not trusting her voice yet. Jimmy pulled back just enough to look at her. His eyes were still too bright for someone pretending to be fine.

"No matter what," he said, quieter, "it's *you* and *me*. Brother and sister against the world."

Sasha let out a small laugh that trembled at the edges.

“I know,” she said lightly. “I know.”

He searched her face anyway, still not satisfied.

“Then why do you look like that?”

Sasha’s brows lifted.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re about to cry,” Jimmy said bluntly, because he was terrible at dancing around things when it mattered.

Sasha stared at him for a second, then huffed out a soft laugh and looked down at the plates in her hands like they were suddenly fascinating.

“It’s just…” she started, then stopped.

Jimmy didn’t push with force. He just waited, the way he’d learned to do in Pelmont. The way he never would’ve done on Earth. Sasha finally sighed and leaned her hip against the counter.

“It’s nothing bad,” she said. “It’s just—watching you tonight…watching you with Tom. With Cathy. Watching Ian look at you the way he does now…”

Her voice softened.

“I’m proud of you,” she admitted. “Like…*really* proud.”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched into a faint half smile, like he wanted to make a joke, but he didn’t.

“And it makes that…overprotective part of me flare up,” Sasha continued, shaking her head as if she was annoyed at herself. “Because the more I love you, the more my brain wants to bubble-wrap you.”

Jimmy let out a small, breathy laugh.

“Yeah. That sounds like you.”

Sasha smiled, but her eyes were still shiny.

“I’m not sad,” she clarified. “I’m just…processing. Like—this is the thing I wanted. This is *literally* the thing I came here for. And now that it’s happening, it’s real, and it’s big, and it’s…”

She shrugged, helpless.

“…it’s a lot.”

Jimmy’s face softened in a way that almost didn’t look like him. He stepped in again—gentler now—and squeezed her shoulders.

“Sasha, you’re *not losin*’ me, *ever*,” he said quietly. “I’m right *here*.”

Sasha nodded.

“I know.”

He held her gaze a second longer, like he was making sure. Like he was storing the truth somewhere inside him. Then, with a faint half-smile returning—small, brave—he leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“I *love* you,” he said, low and simple, like he was still getting used to saying it out loud.

Sasha’s face warmed instantly. She laughed, soft and embarrassed by affection even though she was the one who’d started all this.

“I love you too,” she said, “now go home.”

Jimmy took a step back, letting the Sir Lord mask slide on just enough to keep his heart from spilling again. He lifted his brows, cocky for cover.

“Same time tomorrow then,” he said with a faint smile.

Sasha squinted.

“Jimmy…”

He pointed his ringed finger toward the living room like he was making a royal decree.

“Bright and early,” he announced, his smile widening, “with a *big* ass fuckin’ bowl of cereal…and me watchin’ the Teletummies like it’s my full-time *job*.”

Sasha burst out laughing and shook her head.

“You are ridiculous. You know you don’t have to come over if you don’t want to. I’ll be fine, really.”

Jimmy’s smile flashed—bright, electric, and boyish.

"Yeah, but I *do* want to,” Jimmy said. “Because sittin’ in your house, eatin’ cereal and watchin’ Teletummies with you is currently the closest thing I’ve got to bein’ fuckin’ sane.”

She laughed and then he turned and headed for the door, pausing just long enough to glance back at her like he had one more thing to say—then deciding not to, because he’d already said it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, sis,” he said softly.

“Tomorrow,” Sasha replied.

The door closed behind him, and even in the quiet, even with dishes waiting and the house settling, Sasha felt it—like a steady warmth in her chest. He was walking home. He was safe

and he was still her adorable baby brother.

Scene Song: "No More" ~ 3LW

Kellie's house sat quiet under the soft Pelmont night—porch light on, curtains drawn, the street outside calm enough to hear the ocean if you listened hard. Jimmy didn't go to the front door. Of course he didn't. He circled the side like a cat with a crown. Her kitchen window was cracked open—just enough for the breeze. Jimmy glanced up at it, then smirked like he'd been handed permission by the universe itself.

"Right," he muttered, already climbing. "Easy."

He swung a leg through, his trainers finding purchase on the counter like they'd done this before, and dropped into the kitchen with ridiculous confidence for someone wearing a tiara. The kitchen smelled faintly like vanilla and something warm—candle or incense. He turned—And stopped. Kellie stood in the living room mirror's glow, adjusting the strap of a mini dress like she had somewhere to be. Her red curls fell over her shoulders in soft waves, her posture easy, her face done just enough to say *I'm not staying in tonight.* Jimmy's mouth went slightly open. It wasn't the Sir Lord smirk. Not yet. It was pure, boyish pause—like his brain lagged for a second. Then he recovered, the swagger sliding back onto him like a coat.

"…Holy shite," Jimmy breathed, and his voice came out quieter than he meant it to. "You look…fuckin' dangerous."

Kellie froze mid-adjustment. Her eyes flicked toward the kitchen, then narrowed.

"Jimmy?"

He leaned in the doorway as if he belonged there. Kellie's brows lifted as her gaze swept him from crown to trainers.

"How," she said slowly, "are you in my house?"

Jimmy shrugged like it was the most normal question in the world.

"Window was open."

Kellie stared, then pointed toward the front of the house.

"You know there's a whole door on this place, right?"

He scoffed and shook his head like *she* was the one being strange.

"Aye, and you know there's a whole world full of people who knock, and I'm not one of them."

Kellie's mouth twitched, amused despite herself.

"You're ridiculous."

He lightly laughed.

"Look at you," he said with a half smile, "you're dressed like you're about to go ruin somebody's peace. Where are you goin'?"

Kellie turned back to the mirror, smoothing her dress with a casual little smile that was almost too casual.

"I've got a date."

Jimmy's whole body went still, like someone had hit pause.

"…A what?" he asked, the word sharp.

"A date," she repeated, glancing at him through the mirror. "Spike introduced me to this guy. Luke. He lives like three blocks down from him."

Jimmy blinked once, then laughed—short and humorless.

"Spike introduced you."

"Yeah."

"To a guy."

"Yeah," she responded.

"To take you out."

"Jimmy," she said, turning now, "why are you saying it like it's a crime?"

Because the jealousy hit him so fast he didn't have time to dress it up as arrogance, his jaw tightened. His eyes hardened. His voice came out too controlled.

"Because you barely know him."

Kellie's brows lifted.

"And?"

"And…" Jimmy said, stepping forward a half-step. "You're just—goin' out. With some random bloke. Like it's nothin'."

Kellie let out a sharp laugh.

"It *is* nothing. It's dinner, Jimmy. Not a blood oath."

“Don’t be clever,” he snapped, and his accent got thicker when the emotion pushed on it. “You don’t even know what the fuck he’s like.”

Kellie tilted her head.

“Neither did you,” she said, very calmly, “when you climbed through my window like a burglar.”

Jimmy’s nostrils flared.

“That’s not the same fuckin’ thing.”

“Oh, it’s not?” Kellie walked past him, heading toward a small table where her bag sat. She picked up her keys.

Jimmy turned to follow her, frowning.

“Kellie.”

“*What*?” she responded in an annoyed tone.

“You’re really just gonna go?”

Kellie paused and looked at him like he’d just asked her why gravity existed.

“Yeah. That’s what dates are.”

Jimmy scoffed again, the sound bitter.

“And you think that’s smart.”

Kellie’s eyes narrowed.

“No,” she said, stepping closer. “I think it’s *normal*, something you don’t seem to understand.”

“I understand *plenty*,” Jimmy replied, his voice rising.

Kellie’s stare turned sharp.

“Then why do you look like you want to fight him and he hasn’t even shown up yet—”

“Because I don’t want you goin’ out with some—some guy you hardly fuckin’ know,” Jimmy snapped, too fast and too honest.

Kellie’s eyes flashed.

“And why do you care who I go out with?” she shot back. “The days of me being a ‘Jimmy’ are *over*. So what is this?”

Jimmy's chest rose and fell once, hard. He started pacing like a caged thing, then stopped with his back half-turned to her, jaw working.

"It's—" he began.

Kellie waited. Jimmy's voice rose like he was mad at himself for even having a voice.

"It's because I—"

He stopped and closed his eyes, and for a split second, he looked *almost* like he'd rather swallow glass than be emotionally exposed. Kellie's face shifted, slowly. Her eyes narrowed in on him, not cruel—just *locked.*

"Oh," she said softly, and the grin started building, "no. Finish it."

Jimmy waved a hand without turning around.

"No, never mind."

Kellie's voice snapped, pure Jimmy Ink.

"Oh, don't you start that cowardly shite with me."

Jimmy turned, offended.

"Coward?"

"Yes, coward," she said, stepping into his space. "You don't get to storm into my house through a damn window, act like you own my evening, then clam up when it's time to say what you actually mean."

Jimmy stared at her. The stare. *The Sir Lord stare*—steady, annoyed, *dangerous*. However, behind it, something else trembled: fear of being rejected, fear of being laughed at, fear of wanting someone and getting left anyway. He swallowed, hard. Then he exhaled loud, defeated, like he was surrendering a weapon.

"Fine," he said.

He looked down at the floor like the words were embarrassing. Then he forced them out anyway—rough, blunt, honest in the way only Jimmy could manage.

"I fuckin' like you."

Kellie went still.

Jimmy's brows pulled together like he hated that he'd said it.

"And I don't want you goin' out with anyone else."

Kellie blinked, once—surprised, then amused, then…softened.

“Wow,” she murmured, like she couldn’t believe she’d gotten him to say it. “And you didn’t think to mention this at any point before I left Sasha’s house?”

Jimmy’s lips pressed thin.

“You didn’t ask.”

Kellie let out a breathy laugh. She stepped back half a pace, studying him like he was a strange animal that had just learned how to be gentle.

“Did you feel that way on Earth?” she asked, quieter.

Jimmy’s face twisted into immediate disgust.

“On Earth,” he said flatly, “I hated your fuckin’ guts.”

Kellie’s brows jumped. Jimmy continued without mercy:

“I thought you were a treacherous cunt who I specifically asked my Jimmies to commandeer.”

Kellie stared at him for half a second, then laughed so hard she had to look away, shaking her head like *of course that’s what he’d say.*

“You are unbelievable.”

Jimmy shrugged, unbothered.

“But up here,” he added, and the tone changed—less knife, more honesty, “up here in this realm, you’re…different.”

Kellie looked back at him. He held her gaze, awkward in the sincerity.

“I like you,” he repeated, quieter. “And you look…really fuckin’ beautiful tonight.”

Kellie’s smile slowed into something warmer. She lifted her brows.

“So,” she said, dragging the word out. “You want me to go out with Luke tonight?”

Jimmy’s half-smile returned—sharp, cocky, possessive in the most Sir Lord way possible.

“Of course I fuckin’ don’t.”

Kellie’s eyes sparkled.

“And why would I not?” she teased.

Jimmy stepped closer, close enough that his rings flashed by her cheek as he lifted his hand and brushed a curl back like he was testing permission.

“Because,” he murmured, his voice low, accent thickening again, “why would you go out with Luke…when you’ve got me?”

Kellie laughed quietly, her breath catching at the confidence of it.

“You climbed through my window,” she reminded him, like a warning.

“Aye,” he said, and his smile tilted. “Romantic, isn’t it?”

Kellie shook her head, still smiling. Then Jimmy leaned in and kissed her—no joke in it, no performance. Just heat, just certainty, just that sudden, startling softness he only showed when he wasn’t thinking. Kellie kissed him back, hard, and the rest of the night didn’t belong to arguing. It belonged to *choosing*.

****** Afterward ******

Jimmy was propped against the headboard like a man who’d been forcibly returned to Earth after floating in space. His hair was slightly disheveled and damp with perspiration, and his breath was slightly heavy. Kellie shifted beside him, pulling the sheet up like she was doing it out of principle, not modesty. She studied him for a long beat, then finally asked the question like she didn’t care—but her eyes did.

“So…what are we now?” she said. “Like…are we a thing? Boyfriend, girlfriend?”

Jimmy’s face twisted into an immediate sour frown, like the word *boyfriend* had tried to crawl into his ear.

“Absolutely not,” he said flatly.

Kellie blinked.

“*Not*?”

Jimmy waved a hand like he was dismissing a peasant petition.

“I’m not boyfriend material,” he said, voice rich with Sir Lord disdain. “I’m *mate* material. That’s the word. ‘Boyfriend’ sounds like I’m about to start wearin’ matching fuckin’ jumpers and askin’ if you’ve had enough water today.”

Kellie lightly laughed.

“You definitely don’t do water,” she responded.

Kellie laughed again and then leaned in a little, testing him.

“Okay, *mate material.* Are we exclusive?”

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed like the answer should’ve been obvious.

“Aye,” he said. “Exclusive.”

Then, harsher—because he couldn’t say something tender without dressing it in armor:

“And to be crystal-fuckin’-clear, Kellie, I’m not sharin’ you. You’re not goin’ on dates. You’re not gettin’ taken out by some random arsehole named Luke who thinks a ‘good night’ text is foreplay.”

“Listen to you,” Kellie said, her brows lifted, amused.

Jimmy shot her a look.

“Don’t get cocky.”

“Can we tell Sasha?” Kellie asked, her smile softening.

Jimmy’s mouth pulled into a faint frown like that topic came with consequences.

“Sasha already knows.”

Kellie’s eyebrows jumped.

“She does? How?”

Jimmy gave her a deadpan stare.

“Because Sasha’s gnosis is off the charts,” he said, like he was explaining gravity. “That woman can read a soul from three blocks away.”

Kellie laughed quietly, almost fondly.

“That’s actually…cool.”

“Aye,” Jimmy muttered, then his face shifted. The humor fell away. He sat up more, clearing his throat like he had to drag the next words out of himself with both hands.

“But if we’re doin’ this,” Jimmy said, voice lower, “you need to understand somethin’.”

Kellie’s smile faded into attention.

“Okay.”

Jimmy stared forward for a few seconds, jaw tight.

“I’m…not normal,” he said bluntly—then scoffed like the understatement annoyed him. “Not development-wise. You know that.”

Kellie nodded once.

“I know.”

“And it’s not just gonna…go away,” Jimmy continued. “And I’m not even sure I want it to. There’ll be times when I'm thirty-six. Proper. Present. Talkin’ and actin’ like a grown man.”

He swallowed.

“And then there’ll be times when I’m eight again. Then ten. Then fifteen. And probably older still, bit by bit, as it catches up.”

Kellie didn’t flinch. She just listened.

“And it’s because I missed it,” Jimmy said, his voice rough. “I missed those years. And apparently my brain’s tryin’ to make up for it now, like it’s collectin’ debt.”

Kellie’s eyes softened.

“And when that happens,” he added, “I’m gonna do shite that looks stupid to people who’ve always had normal. Like…wakin’ up early and goin’ to Sasha’s with a big fuckin’ bowl of cereal to watch the Teletummies.”

Kellie’s mouth twitched into a half smile.

“Teletummies.”

“Don’t start,” Jimmy said as he shot her a glare.

Kellie held up a hand while still half smiling.

“I’m not.”

Jimmy kept going anyway, because once he started, it was like a confession that wouldn’t stop bleeding.

“It’s not specifically just for her,” he said. “It’s more so for *me*. That’s my therapy, *she’s* my therapy. She’s my...whatever-the-fuck you call it. Safety. Routine. Her and her place are where I can be little again without someone usin’ it against me.

He inhaled sharply, then said the part that mattered most:

“Sasha is my sister,” Jimmy said, “but she’s also the closest thing I’ve had to a mother in twenty-eight years. And I *want* that and I *need* that. I need *her* and so I need you to know that I’m not negotiatin’ that.”

Kellie nodded slowly, understanding in her face.

“And you,” Jimmy added, voice quieter but firm, “are *you*. You’ve got a place with me too. But I’m tellin’ you straight: there’s always gonna be a place for Sasha in my life. *Always*,

because if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't even be here."

Kellie held his gaze for a long moment, reading how serious he was—how unperformed.

"…Okay," she said softly. "I can live with that."

"Maybe I could come with you sometimes," she carefully added, "like…we could do the cereal and TV thing together—"

"*No*," Jimmy said instantly.

Kellie blinked.

"No?"

Jimmy's frown sharpened like a blade.

"No," he repeated, unapologetic. "That's *mine*. Those mornings with Sasha are *mine*."

Kellie stared at him, then gave a short laugh.

"You're jealous…of your own sister."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, irritated at being psychoanalyzed.

"I'm *not* jealous," he snapped. "I'm…*protective* of my therapy. Pelmont lets you *feel* what's real, and since my mom, Sasha's the first person I've had where safety didn't turn into control."

His mouth tightened.

"Those mornings—cereal with *her*, watching the Teletummies with *her*—that's where my soul decompresses. That's where I learn I'm not abandoned."

He paused for two seconds.

"Because she *teaches* me that," he added, his voice roughening.

He swallowed, with his jaw flexing like he hated that he was saying it out loud. Then his eyes sharpened again, the Sir Lord edge snapping back into place.

"And if I let it become a group activity," he said, blunt and low, "then it stops workin'. She stops bein' *my* therapy and becomes everyone else's."

He exhaled hard through his nose.

"And I'm *not*...*I'm* not doin' that."

Kellie's look turned gentler.

"Okay. That's fair."

Jimmy's jaw flexed once like he hated how honest he was being. Then he lifted his chin—his tiara catching the lamp light like he was about to declare war.

"And before you start thinkin' I'm choosin' her over you," he said, his voice sharp, "we've got a pact. Me and Sasha."

Kellie blinked.

"A pact?"

"Aye. If she ever meets somebody—mate, husband, whatever—she's tellin' them the same shite I'm tellin' you right now."

Kellie's brow lifted.

"Which is…?"

Jimmy leaned in a fraction, eyes locked, all swagger and seriousness stitched together.

"No matter what happens," he said, "there will always be a place for me with her. And a place for her with me, and if I'm made to choose between you and her, Kellie…I'm choosin' her, because after everything I've been through, I *need* my therapy more than anythin' else. But I'd hope you'd never make me choose, because I want you *both* in my life. I want my sister where she belongs, and I want you too. So don't make me cut myself in half to prove somethin' I'm already tryin' to give you."

Kellie held his gaze, quieter now. After sighing, Jimmy's voice dropped, not softer—just more real.

"There'll be days we're apart though," he said. "There'll be days we're doin' our own lives. But when we need that sibling bond session—when I need to remember I'm not abandoned—when she needs to remember she's not alone—"

He swallowed, like the words tasted like something he wasn't used to admitting.

"—we'll come together," he continued, "and it'll just be her and me. Two people who never got to be kids….bein' little kid siblings together. That's the deal."

Kellie stared at him for a beat, reading him the way she did when she was deciding whether to fight him or understand him. Jimmy immediately ruined the tenderness on purpose—because of course he did.

"And since we're talkin' about Sasha," he added, waving a hand like he was changing the subject but absolutely wasn't, "I already know she's got a wee thing for that Irish former-vampire bastard with the southern drawl...Remmick."

Kellie's mouth twitched into a half smile.

"Remmick?" she asked.

“Aye,” Jimmy said, nodding like it was obvious. “She showed me this film about him—*Sinners*, I think it was called. That Jack bloke played him. Mr. Charming. Mr. ‘I play music and say poetic shite and make women forget they’ve got common sense.’ She said he and a few of the others are supposed to be makin’ their way up to this realm soon.”

“They’d be cute together,” Kellie said while shaking her head, amused.

“Aye,” Jimmy said. “Maybe when that broody Irish bastard gets here, we should play matchmaker.”

Kellie looked at him with a brow raised and a half smile.

“*You*? Playing matchmaker?”

Jimmy frowned like she was the stupid one.

“*Yes*, me,” he said. “Because Sasha deserves somebody poetic and haunted enough to keep up with her, and Remmick looks like the kind of bloke who’d stare at her like she was the best fuckin’ thing the universe ever made.”

Kellie laughed.

“And if she gets with him,” Jimmy continued, “maybe then she can stop draggin’ me into all that Irish ballad shite and take Remmick instead, so she can sit there listenin’ while he plays some sad bastard tune on the banjo.”

Kellie laughed again, then after a second or two, she reached for his hand, threaded her fingers with his and kissed his knuckles. Jimmy yanked his hand back like she’d tried to feed him vegetables.

“Absolutely fuckin’ not,” he said, disgusted on principle. “Don’t do that lovey-dovey hand-kiss shite.”

Kellie laughed.

“You said you like me.”

“Aye,” Jimmy said, glancing at her like she was the one being unreasonable. “I *like* you. I didn’t say I’m becomin’ the lead in a fuckin’ romance novel.”

Kellie’s eyes sparkled.

“So what are you, then?”

Jimmy leaned in, kissed her—slower this time. Not hungry. Not frantic. Just…steady. Like he was trying to learn a language without turning it into a joke. When he pulled back, he frowned deeply and exhaled loudly, staring down like he’d found something in himself and didn’t know where to put it. Kellie tilted her head, brow raised.

“What?” she asked.

Jimmy swallowed.

“That kiss,” he said, almost annoyed by it. “It felt…charged.”

Kellie’s mouth turned mischievous.

“Charged where? Like—what body part?”

Jimmy shot her a look so sharp it could cut glass. He tapped two fingers to his chest.

“*Here.*”

Kellie’s expression softened instantly.

“…Oh,” she said, very quietly.

Jimmy’s voice came rough, confused.

“That’s new,” he muttered. “That’s not…how it usually feels. Not like Earth. Not like the old shite. This is—” he frowned harder, searching. “—*human*.”

Kellie didn’t tease him. She just moved closer, cupped his face gently like she was handling something fragile without making him feel weak.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “Human.”

Then she kissed him again—longer, softer. Jimmy hesitated for half a second—then his arms slid around her, pulling her in like his body finally understood what his mouth couldn’t admit: *this is safe, and I want it.* And for once, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal didn’t have a punchline ready.

<u>Scene Song: “The Bone Temple” ~ 28 Years Later Soundtrack</u>

Jimmy let himself in like it was a sacred ritual now. The house was still dim with that early-morning hush, the kind that made even the air feel softer. Jimmy moved through it in his signature dark purple tracksuit—clean, and sharp like a bruise he wore proudly, tiara sitting centered like a declaration, rings flashing as he adjusted them around his fingers with unnecessary precision, platinum hair perfectly done like he’d had a stylist. He drifted into Sasha’s bedroom doorway and stopped. The bed was made, not “she rolled out and pulled the blanket up halfway” made—*made* made. Corners tucked. Pillows fluffed. Smooth like no one had slept there at all. Jimmy’s face tightened. A faint frown. Then deeper. Confused first—then the confusion slid into something sharper: *surprise with teeth***.** He stepped inside like the room might explain itself.

“Sasha?” he called, not loud yet.

Just…expectant. Like she'd answer from under the covers with a sleepy "what?" and everything would go back into place. Nothing. He walked around the bed with a quickening pace, eyes flicking to the nightstand, the chair, the floor—little details he didn't even know he was checking, the way a person checks for a pulse. He pushed into the bathroom. Empty. No water running. No brushing teeth. No Sasha. He stared at the mirror like it might show him a version of reality where she was still here.

"*Sasha*!" he called again, louder this time.

Nothing answered except the quiet hum of the house—soft, indifferent.

Jimmy backed out of the bathroom, his movements getting too fast, too sharp. He crossed the room and went straight into the kitchen like maybe she'd be there, barefoot, making coffee, laughing at him for being dramatic. The kitchen was empty too. The air smelled faintly clean, like citrus and soap, but there was no warmth of *someone here*. Jimmy turned his head left and right—fast. Faster. His styled platinum hair swayed with the force of the motion, falling into his eyes and whipping back out again like it was trying to keep up with the panic.

"Sasha?!" he tried again, his voice cracking on the name in a way he would've denied if anyone had been there to hear it.

Nothing. His chest tightened. That familiar pressure—like a hand closing around his ribs. He pivoted hard and rushed back to the bedroom. Straight to the closet. He yanked the closet door open. It wasn't locked. Jimmy froze. His mouth parted without his permission. A small, shocked inhale. Because Sasha *always* locked it. *Always*. Because all her hair products were in there. Her accessories. The good stuff. The stuff Jimmy had used before with no shame, no boundaries—because in Jimmy's head, if you loved him, your things were his things, and if you left him, it meant you never loved him in the first place.

The unlocked closet door didn't just confuse him. It confirmed something in the part of his brain that had never healed. His heartbeat started thumping like a fist against a door. He slowly turned away from the closet, eyes unfocused, the room tilting just slightly. And then—memory hit him like a flash grenade. A hallway. A different house. *Scotland*. The air full of screaming. A glass door. His mother's hands pressed against it, face frantic, eyes huge: *Run, Jimmy. Run.* Jimmy's lungs seized. The adult body in Sasha's bedroom jerked like it had been yanked by a wire. He started to hyperventilate—short, sharp breaths that scraped his throat. Tears rushed into his eyes so fast it felt like drowning.

"No," he whispered, but it came out too small, too young.

Another memory shoved in behind it—*harder*. The rectory. The smell of old wood and cold faith. Him running, begging, a child with blood and terror in his mouth, hands out like prayer. His father's face—not comforting, not human—lit with awful certainty. Judgement Day. Not *"help my son,"* but *"this is what must happen."* Jimmy's body shuddered. He let out a loud, pained gasp, like he'd been punched in the chest. Then he stumbled—half ran—toward the sofa at the end of Sasha's bed and dropped onto it like his legs had stopped working. The room spun. The edges blurred. His fingers clawed at his own hair, gripping his head like he could physically hold his mind together. And then the thoughts came—rapid, vicious, overlapping: *She's abandoned you. She left. Everyone leaves you. You're alone again. This*

time you don't even have the Jimmies. She left like your father did. Jimmy's breath hitched into a choking sound. And then—worse—a laugh, not Sasha's, not anyone living. It was a low, ugly, *sinister* laughing sound that threaded itself through his head like a needle. Jimmy slammed his palms over his ears like he could block it out.

"Stop," he hissed.

The laughter kept going, and something in him snapped—sharp and sudden.

"SHUT UP!" Jimmy screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice tearing. "SHUT UP! SHUT UP!"

Silence didn't come, not immediately. In fact, it never did. Instead, Jimmy's body folded inward like he'd been crushed. In one swift, childlike motion, he yanked his legs up onto the sofa, crossing them criss-cross, small and tight. His shoulders curled. His face dropped into his hands. And then the sobbing hit, not pretty crying, not cinematic, *eight-year-old* sobbing —jagged, helpless, the kind that steals your breath and makes your shoulders shake like you're breaking apart. His hair fell forward around his hands, hiding him, like he could disappear inside himself. He cried like that for minutes, long enough for his throat to hurt, long enough for his chest to ache, long enough for the house to feel like it wasn't a house anymore at all, but a place you get left behind in. And then—a sound, not from him. A lock turning in the kitchen. A door opening. Footsteps. A grocery bag rustling. Sasha's voice—muffled at first, then clearer as she moved through the house.

"Damn, I can't believe it's hot out already this—"

She stopped when she heard it—the sobbing. Sasha placed the grocery bag on the island and then her footsteps moved out of the kitchen immediately—faster, urgent, following the sound down the hall. She appeared in her bedroom doorway, her face already twisting with concern.

"Jimmy?" she said. "Baby bro—what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

The second Jimmy heard her voice, he snapped his head up like he'd been hit with electricity. His eyes were red, wet and wild. His frown was deep—split between shock and fear. He stared at her like she wasn't real, like she was a hallucination his brain made up to torture him. Sasha took a step in.

"Jimmy—"

Jimmy lurched off the sofa so fast the cushions bounced. He backed away from her, stumbling a half-step, his breath still ragged.

"Is that…is that *you?*" he demanded, his voice shaking, childlike and furious all at once. "Is it really you?"

Sasha blinked, thrown for half a second—then she let out a soft, confused laugh.

"Uh—*yeah*?" she said gently, "yeah, it's me. Of course it's me. What—Jimmy, what happened?"

Jimmy's mouth opened and nothing came out at first. Then it did—fast, messy, shaking apart.

"Where were you?" he choked, his voice rising. "I looked—I looked *everywhere*, I—your bed was made and you weren't—your bathroom—your kitchen—"

Tears streamed down his face again. He gestured wildly, as if he could point at the emptiness hard enough it would explain itself.

"Why did you *leave*?" he whispered, the word *leave* cracking like a bone.

Sasha's expression softened immediately.

"Oh, Jimmy—no," she said, stepping forward carefully. "I didn't *leave*, leave. I just—I woke up early and I wanted eggs Benedict, okay? So, I went into the kitchen to make it and I broke an egg on the floor—"

She made a face, half embarrassed, half apologetic—

"And I didn't have any eggs left, so I ran to the store to get more."

Jimmy stared at her and for a second his face held blank disbelief. Then his frown tightened into something angrier—because anger was easier than admitting how scared he'd been.

"You didn't *think*," Jimmy said, his tearful voice low and shaking with rage, "to *tell* me?"

Sasha opened her mouth. Jimmy stepped forward, his eyes blazing now, tears still falling.

"I came in here and you were *gone*," he said, the words hitting hard, "and your closet was unlocked—your fuckin' *closet*!"

Jimmy gestured sharply toward it with his trembling pointer finger like the closet was evidence in court.

"And I thought—"

He stopped as his throat worked like he was swallowing glass, and then he forced it out anyway, quieter, like admitting it cost him.

"I thought you abandoned me," he said. "Just like…"

He hesitated, fighting the breakdown with everything he had.

"…just like my father."

Sasha's face flickered—hurt, guilt, understanding dawning too late.

"Oh, no, Jimmy—" she started, voice soft.

But she still didn't *get* how deep it went, not yet. She stepped in with her arms open.

"Come here," Sasha said. "Jeez, kid, you're a case."

She hugged him—warm, sisterly, tight. Jimmy didn't hug her back. His arms stayed stiff at his sides. And Sasha felt it—she felt the trembling rolling through him like he was vibrating. Like his body was still trapped in that hallway, still seeing his mother's hands at that glass door, still tasting his father's rejection.

"I didn't leave you, baby bro. I'm here," Sasha said.

Jimmy's eyes shut and for two seconds it looked like he might melt into her. Then the rage surged—hot, shameful, panicked rage—because his nervous system didn't know the difference between love and danger when abandonment was involved. He shoved her hard.

"*NO*!" Jimmy shouted, his voice ripped raw, tearful and furious all at once.

Sasha stumbled back, nearly losing her balance. Her eyes widened—startled and a little scared. And Jimmy—Jimmy flinched like lightning had struck him. Like he'd *already* decided what came next. His shoulders jerked up. His chin slightly tucked and his arms briefly half-raised in front of his face on pure reflex—bracing for a slap, a punch, a punishment that never arrived. He took one sharp step back with his eyes wide and wet, breathing fast like he'd forgotten how lungs worked. For a split second, he didn't look like Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal at all.

He looked like an eight-year-old who'd learned from his father that being loud gets you hurt. Sasha froze. She didn't move toward him. She didn't reach. She didn't raise her voice. She just stared—because the flinch told her everything the words hadn't. Jimmy stood there shaking, realizing what he'd just done, realizing what he'd just *expected*. His jaw tightened, humiliation and fear battling across his face. Then he forced his voice back into something hard—because hard was safer than small.

"You should've—" he stuttered, his words tripping over each other because his anger was too big for his mouth. "You should've left a—a—a *note* or—or—or something, or came and—and got me and took me *with* you!"

Sasha didn't move. She just stared, finally seeing the truth: This wasn't drama. This was *PTSD trauma*. Jimmy's head turned away sharply, his jaw tightening. Then his face cracked. The rage drained out like a plug had been pulled. He looked back at her and his eyes filled again. And he broke into softer sobs—quiet, ashamed, exhausted.

"I thought you were gone forever," he whispered, his voice small. "Just…*gone.* Like my dad, like my mom, like my sisters."

He swallowed, shoulders hunched. His next words came out like a child trying to understand a cruel rule.

"How could you *do* that to me?" he asked with a tiny shrug, as if his body didn't know what else to do. "Wha—what did I do *wrong* for you to *do* that to me? Why would you leave *me* here?"

Sasha's eyes glistened. She slowly stepped forward towards him, as if making any fast moves towards him would shatter him, approaching him like a frightened child.

“Jimmy,” she said quietly. “You did nothing wrong, I’m *sorry*.”

She took his shaking hands in hers.

“I didn’t think,” Sasha admitted. “I didn’t think what it would feel like to you. I should have.”

Jimmy’s gaze stayed lowered, his tears falling onto his knuckles. Sasha squeezed his hands.

“I promise you,” she said, voice firm with real meaning now, “I won’t do that again. If I leave, I’ll tell you next time. I’ll leave a note. Okay?”

Jimmy’s eyes darted up—hesitant, suspicious, still wounded. He stared at her like he was trying to decide if belief was safe. Then, after a long second, he slowly nodded. Sasha exhaled like she’d been holding her breath for his whole life. She pulled him into a hug again—slower, more mindful this time. And this time, Jimmy hugged her back, but lightly—like he was still shaking off the flashbacks. His sobs were quieter against her shoulder. Sasha held him tighter, not suffocating but anchoring.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy,” she said in a low voice. “I promise it won’t happen again.”

Jimmy’s breath shook, and in a tearful voice so quiet it barely existed, he whispered:

“Okay.”

And he stayed in her arms long enough for his body to remember that this was real, that the door hadn’t closed, that the person who found him hadn’t left him behind.

~ Later ~

As Jimmy stood by the cabinet in the kitchen, pulling out a box of cereal from the cabinet, Sasha walked in and walked over to him with a smile.

“So, since I’ve had my eggs Benedict already, I thought we’d watch Teletubbies together,” she said lightly. “Since Poe has always been my favorite.”

Jimmy stared at her like she’d admitted to a crime.

“…Poe?” he repeated, a faint frown forming while a half-smile tried to fight through it. “Sasha. Be serious.”

She turned, hands on her hips, amused.

“What? Poe is adorably cute. She reminds me of a little red panda.”

Jimmy scoffed, like he couldn’t believe he was being forced to educate her this early.

“Poe’s fine,” he conceded, as if doing her a favor. “But Tinky Winky is clearly the superior one. Tall, purple, confident, probably has better taste—and he’d absolutely win in a fuckin’ fight.”

Sasha laughed.

“You’re picking Teletubbies based on combat ability now?”

“Aye,” Jimmy said, deadpan. “That’s what happens when you’ve lived in the apocalypse and then died and came back with opinions.”

When it came to getting a bowl, Jimmy went for violence. He pulled a *mixing bowl* out of the cabinet like it was a trophy, set it on the counter with a decisive thunk, and began pouring cereal like he was preparing supplies for winter. Sasha watched, chewing the inside of her cheek like she was trying not to laugh. Jimmy caught her expression and narrowed his eyes.

“What are you smirking at?”

Sasha finally broke, laughing openly.

“That bowl is for baking, Jimmy.”

Jimmy poured milk without slowing down.

“Well right now, it’s for *my breakfast.*”

“That’s not a bowl, Jimmy, that’s a threat.”

“I told you yesterday,” he said with a faint frown and a half smile, “same time, same *big*-ass fuckin’ bowl of cereal. Sir Lord Jimmy does not break his promises.”

Sasha laughed harder, and Jimmy half smiled like he liked being the reason—even if he’d never admit it with dignity. He carried his cereal to the living room with her following beside him. And the moment they sat down on the sofa—both of them dropping into criss-cross applesauce like it was muscle memory—something quietly clicked into place. This wasn’t Sasha entertaining him. This wasn’t Sasha babysitting the broken parts. This was two people choosing to be kids again. Jimmy leaned forward, elbows on his knees, mixing bowl balanced like it belonged there. Sasha tucked her legs under herself, shoulder brushing his. The Teletubbies theme started and Jimmy, in full tiara and chains and tracksuit royalty, joined in without hesitation, not quietly, and not under his breath. He sang with his whole chest like it was church, like it was freedom, like it was the only anthem he trusted. Sasha turned her head, laughing into her spoon.

Jimmy didn’t stop, he kept singing, his eyes wide with that bright-electric joy he used to weaponize and now just…*wore,* and when the theme hit that loud “TELETUBBIES!” call, Jimmy lit up like a kid hearing the ice-cream truck two blocks away. Minutes later, on-screen, one of the Teletubbies did a dramatic little flip—and Jimmy gasped like he’d witnessed magic.

“Ooh—fuckin’ *cool!* Did you see that?!” Jimmy exclaimed before letting out his signature giddy little-boy laugh.

Sasha laughed too, as Jimmy, still half delighted—leaned a little closer to the screen like he was afraid joy might move away if he didn’t pay attention to it. Jimmy ate for a few seconds in silence, then paused mid-spoon like a thought physically grabbed him by the collar. He turned his head and looked at Sasha, not with the Sir Lord stare. Not with suspicion. Just… bright, *warm*.

“Hey,” he said, like he was about to announce something important and silly at the same time. “I just thought of somethin’.”

Sasha glanced over with a brow lifting.

“What?”

Jimmy leaned back into the couch like a king delivering prophecy from a cereal bowl.

“This story we’re creatin’,” he said with a half smile. “It started with us…and it’s endin’ with us. So what one-liner are we givin’ it to memorialize the moment?”

Sasha blinked at him.

“You’re asking me for a tagline?”

“Aye,” he said simply with a brighter smile, “because I’m Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal. I believe in drama and closure.”

Sasha lightly laughed and then shook her head, thinking for a few seconds, her eyes drifting back to the TV where the Teletubbies were wobbling around like little colorful aliens with rent-free joy. Then she said, with full sincerity:

“…And *everyone* from *The Bone Temple* lived happily ever after.”

Jimmy stared at her, a faint frown pulled at his mouth…but a smile kept trying to break through it like it couldn’t help itself.

“…Sasha,” he said slowly, like he was deeply disappointed in her as a professional. “That is the most cheesy, bedtime-story shite I have ever heard in my entire life.”

Sasha burst out laughing.

“I think it’s poetically sweet and it rings true!”

“It’s *criminal,*” Jimmy insisted, gesturing with his spoon like he was cross-examining her. “You just slapped a happy sticker on the apocalypse and called it a fuckin’ day.”

Sasha laughed harder, leaning into him.

“Shut up!”

Jimmy tried to hold his serious face for two seconds, then he failed—his mouth cracked into that boyish grin, and he laughed right along with her, bright and unguarded. And that's what it was, really, not a cartoon, not a bowl of cereal, and not even the fact that there were two grown adults, one wearing a tiara, were singing a children's theme song like it mattered.

Scene Song: "Ordinary World" ~ Duran Duran

It was *proof*. Proof that the world could end, yet people could still find their way back to something gentle, that the same hands that once reached for control could learn to reach for comfort, that forgiveness could become terms, and terms could become a table, and the table could become a *home*. Somewhere out there in Pelmont, Ian was probably waking up with his calm, steady heart. Somewhere out there in Pelmont, Ian was probably waking up with that calm, steady heart of his. Samson was probably outside somewhere, laughing at something ridiculous, the kind of laugh that made strangers smile without knowing why.

Spike was probably posted up on his mum's porch steps, with his mum—shoulder to shoulder, sharing a plate of food like it was sacred, her hand on his head the way mothers do when they're making sure their kid is real and still here. And Kellie—Kellie wasn't rolling her eyes. Not today. She was out somewhere in the glow of it all, her hair down, talking at a table with a few others, pretending she was only there because somebody dragged her…while laughing so hard her whole face betrayed her, finally doing that thing she swore she didn't need: *belonging.* Cathy and Tom and Jane Ji and Matthew and George were carrying their own new definitions of peace—careful, earned, *real*, not a fairy tale, not a clean slate. Just a decision they made every morning they woke up—to not let the old world win.

And then in Sasha's house, Sasha sat beside Jimmy like she always would. And *Jimmy*… Jimmy was finally learning an ordinary world didn't mean a perfect one. It meant a livable one. Because that was what all of them had been reaching for from the very beginning—*an ordinary world*, in whatever way they knew how to grab it. Some reached through trauma, through mental and emotional pain that curdled into violence—Jimmy and his Jimmies trying to build a kingdom out of damage so they would never have to feel small again. Some reached through belonging—Spike clinging to the first place that felt like a place, even if it came with teeth. And some reached through the search for humanity again—Ian and Samson dragging it back into the light one choice at a time, stubborn as breath.

An ordinary world meant you could wake up early just to laugh, a world where you could be eight years old for as long as you wished and not be punished for it, a world where love didn't require you to bleed first, a world where two siblings could sit on a sofa, sing a children's theme song like it mattered, and choose ordinary on purpose. The past still existed. The consequences still existed. But the future didn't have to be blood anymore—because they all had found their way back to the *ordinary world.*

Chapter 7: - Remmick

~ Remmick / Sinners ~

~ A year Later ~

Scene Song: "On The Nature Of Daylight" ~ Max Richter

The first thing Remmick felt was *heat*. Not the feverish, blood-mad heat that used to live under his skin—nothing like that. This was clean warmth, sun-on-salt warmth, honest enough to make him suspicious. He lay sprawled on pale sand with the tide's breath drifting in and out a few yards away. The sky above him was an impossible blue—too bright, too calm—like someone had scrubbed the world raw and forgot to put the suffering back in. His clothes were still on him. The same worn pieces he'd had when he walked up on that place with a smile that wasn't a smile. The same shirt, the same trousers, the same boots that had carried him into Club Juke like a promise and a curse. But *he*—he didn't feel like the thing that had died. He felt like a man. Remmick's eyes opened hard. His lungs dragged air like they weren't sure they were allowed to.

For a moment he just stared, blinking slowly, trying to make the scene fit the last memory he owned—wood, chaos, Smoke's face set like a verdict, the jolt of pain, the stake biting into him like the world's final "*no*." He pushed himself up onto his elbows. Sand stuck to his palms. His hands looked…*normal.* No black veins crawling. No hunger gnawing, no hot itch in the gums, no sharpened edge waiting behind the teeth. He raised a hand toward his chest like he expected to find the wound still there. Nothing. Remmick sat up fully and turned his head, scanning the shoreline like he was about to be attacked by sense.

"Where the hell…" he rasped, his voice rough, a slight lazy pull on the vowels—Southern and Irish tangled together like old rope. "Where am I?"

The ocean answered with a soft hush, like it didn't care. Remmick swallowed. His throat tightened. His eyes stung—not from salt air, not from sun, from *memory*, swelling behind his eyes like a bruise. He shut them. Just for a second. Just to breathe. And the world punished him for it. It hit like a flash of lightning behind the eyelids—violent, vivid, merciless. Not a thought. Not a dream. A *replay* with his own hands in it. Smoke's face—surprise turning into horror. Mary—her scream ripping raw, her eyes wide and wet as something inside her broke and followed him into the dark. Cornbread—fighting, stumbling, still trying to be brave even as the wrong kind of life flooded him. The floorboards at Club Juke were slick with spilled drinks and blood and panic, the room full of music that turned into terror. Sammie's eyes, frantic and furious, trying to hold onto his soul with both hands while Remmick tore at the edges of it like a man ripping pages out of a holy book. Grace—Bo—Pearline—Delta Slim—

Stack—faces flashing like photographs thrown into a fire. And above it all: Remmick himself, watching through his own eyes while a sickness wore him like a suit.

Not just feeding, *making a point,* making a kingdom out of other people's fear. The worst part wasn't the violence. The worst part was remembering the *pleasure*—that warped, infected satisfaction—the way it felt like righteousness when it was really just *rot*. Remmick's breath hitched, his chest seized. The flashback didn't end gently. It ripped away like a curtain snapped from its rod, leaving him sitting in bright sun with his hands shaking and his mouth open like he'd been drowned and dragged back. He gasped—loud, helpless—air tearing into him like it didn't belong. Tears flooded his eyes before he could stop them. Not the dramatic kind, the involuntary kind, like his body had decided it was finally safe enough to let the truth hurt.

"No," he whispered, his voice breaking. "No, no—"

His shoulders folded. He bowed his head and his breath came in ragged pulls as soft sobs started to leak out of him, small at first, then deeper—like something inside had been trying to claw its way out for a century. He pressed his forehead to his knuckles.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, to nobody, to the ocean, to the people whose names still tasted like ash. "I'm—I'm sorry."

Then—through the surf—he heard it: laughter, not mocking laughter, not drunken laughter, not the cruel kind. *Real* laughter—warm and bright and alive, carried on the breeze like a song he didn't deserve to hear. Remmick froze mid-breath. His sobs stopped as if someone had grabbed his throat. He lifted his head slowly, eyes wet, face raw, and turned toward the sound. It was coming from inland, past the stretch of sand where beach grass waved in polite rows. Beyond that, he saw a park—green and open and sunlit like a postcard. And there, in that impossible patch of peace, he saw them. Smoke. Annie. And their little girl—three years old, curls bouncing as she ran in clumsy circles, shrieking with the kind of joy that comes from never having been hunted. Remmick stopped so fast it felt like his bones locked. His mind tried to reject the image. Tried to label it a trick, a hallucination. Some last cruel joke the world had saved for him, because Smoke and Annie and their baby—*that baby*—should not be standing in sunlight. Smoke's laugh rolled out low and real. Annie's smile was wide, relaxed, and *free*. Their daughter stumbled toward Smoke, arms out, and Smoke scooped her up like that was what his hands were always meant to do. Remmick's eyes clouded again, tears spilling down his cheeks without permission. He backed up a half-step. His instinct screamed: *turn away! Don't intrude! Don't contaminate that! Don't bring your shadow near their light!* So he started to pivot.

Then he saw them walking—together, like a family—toward a big beach house nearby. White and wide and sun-soaked, with curtains stirring in the windows like the place breathed. The front door opened like the house had been waiting for them. They went inside. Remmick stood there in the grass at the edge of the park, trembling like his body didn't know what to do with hope and horror occupying the same space. A long moment passed, then the sound hit him again—louder now—voices, more laughter, more *life*. Remmick took a step toward the house before he could think better of it, then another. He moved like a man pulled on a

hook, drawn forward by something sharper than hunger: *need.* Not for blood. For proof. He came up near the side window—living room—and looked in.

His breath stopped. Inside was a table set with food and drinks and bright conversation like the world never ended. Cornbread was there, alive and laughing, shoulders loose like the weight had been taken off him. Stack. Mary. Sammie—who looked like the young man he was the night of Club Juke's opening. Grace and Bo. Pearline. Delta Slim. All of them gathered around a dining table like family—like the night at Club Juke hadn't shattered into screams. Like death hadn't put its hands on them. Like they'd been delivered somewhere that didn't punish joy. They were eating. Talking. Teasing. Smiling. Annie sat close to Smoke, their little girl perched between them, gummy grin full of crumbs. Remmick's stomach twisted so hard it felt like he might fold in half. His hands rose to the window glass without touching it, fingers hovering like he didn't deserve even *that* contact. Tears streamed down his face now in steady lines. His mouth opened. No sound came out. All he could feel was the weight of what he'd done, made ten times heavier by the sight of what he'd almost stolen from them permanently. He noticed the back door. It stood slightly open, letting the sea breeze drift through the kitchen into the dining room. An invitation by accident, or a trap by mercy. Remmick didn't know which. His legs moved anyway. He rounded the house quietly, like a thief approaching a church, and came to the back step. The door was there—open, unguarded, normal as breathing. He stepped inside. The kitchen smelled like coffee and warm bread and something sweet. It smelled like a life that didn't include him. Remmick moved forward, cautious, not wanting his boots to sound too loud. He reached the threshold between the kitchen and dining room.

And there he was—standing at the edge of their table like a stain that refused to scrub out. The laughter died, not slowly, *instantly*. A dozen faces snapped toward him like a flock of birds hearing a gunshot. For one frozen second, nobody breathed, then chairs scraped. Smoke stood up so hard his chair nearly toppled. Stack rose with him, shoulders tight, eyes sharpening. Sammie's body went rigid. Delta Slim stood with a slow, wary motion like he'd seen the devil wear a friendly face before. Bo rose too, jaw clenched, ready. Fear didn't live in this room the way it used to—but muscle memory did. They stared at Remmick like the nightmare had crawled through the door again wearing his skin. Smoke's face didn't show surprise, it showed rage, immediate and volcanic. His voice cut through the silence like a whip.

"What the *fuck* are you doin' here?"

Remmick tried to speak. His mouth was dry. His throat tightened.

"I—" his voice cracked, humiliatingly before he swallowed hard. "I don't know. I don't know where I am. I woke up on the beach and—"

Smoke's eyes burned.

"Get out," Smoke said, flat and lethal.

Remmick took a step forward without meaning to, palms lifting slightly like he wasn't trying to threaten.

“Please—just listen,” Remmick said, voice shaking. “I saw y’all through the window. I saw —”

Smoke’s snarl tore through him.

“I said get the *fuck out*, Remmick.”

His name sounded like a curse in Smoke’s mouth. Remmick flinched, but he didn’t step back.

“I’m not here to hurt anyone,” Remmick insisted, his Southern drawl pulled thicker now, the way it did when he was trying not to break apart. “I swear, I’m not. I don’t even— I don’t even feel—”

Stack’s hand moved, subtle, like he was ready to lunge. Delta Slim’s eyes narrowed, scanning Remmick for the first sign of the old monster. Sammie’s voice came tight and low, like a wire pulled taut.

“Why *are* you here?” Sammie asked, “when you should be *gone*?”

Remmick’s eyes flashed wet. His breath hitched again.

“I don’t know,” Remmick responded, and the honesty of it hurt. “I don’t know, but I remember. I remember *everything*.”

Mary’s face tightened, fury rising behind grief.

“Then take that fucking memory somewhere else,” Mary snapped. “We don’t fucking *want* it.”

Cornbread stood too, slower than the others, but when he looked at Remmick there was no softness in it—only a wound that had never learned to close.

“I can *still* feel it, you know?” Cornbread said quietly, his voice like stone. “What you did to me.”

Remmick’s face crumpled. A sob tried to climb up his throat; he crushed it down, jaw trembling.

“I *know*,” Remmick whispered through light sobs.

Smoke took a step forward, and the room felt smaller.

“*No*,” Smoke said sharply. “Don’t fuckin’ stand in my house saying ‘I know’ like that fixes a damn thing!”

Remmick’s hands clenched into fists at his sides, not in threat—like he needed something to hold onto.

“I’m not saying it fixes it,” Remmick responded, his voice breaking again. “I’m sayin’ I finally *see* it. I finally feel what it was—”

Annie's eyes were wet, but her face was hard.

"We felt it the first time," Annie cut in. "We don't need you to *explain* it."

Remmick's breath shuddered out of him. Tears ran freely now, soaking down into his collar. He swallowed and forced the words out like they were being dragged over broken glass.

"I was sick," Remmick said, tears falling. "I'm not using that as an excuse but it's just the truth. Something was done to me long before I ever got to y'all, and I carried that rot straight into your lives. I know that. I *know* it."

Remmick stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, revealing the tears that clouded in them.

"That sickness was put there," Remmick continued, "it was *done* to me."

Smoke's expression didn't change. Remmick pushed on anyway, desperate.

"White men—colonizers—came into my village,," Remmick said, his voice raw, southern lilt trembling. "They slaughtered my family, my people. They left us in the dirt and they turned me into…into that *thing*."

"*Stop*," Mary hissed.

"*Don't*," Annie said, sharply.

Remmick kept going, because once you start bleeding truth you don't get to choose where it spills.

"They made me into what I was," Remmick said, tears falling, "and I carried that rot into y'all's lives. I know I did, and I hate it. I hate it so much I can't—I can't even *breathe* right."

Smoke's voice came out like a growl.

"We don't care what was done to you," Smoke said. "We care about what you did to us."

Remmick's face twisted as he tried his best to hold back more sobs and his shoulders shook.

"I know," Remmick responded, his voice barely audible. "I know. That's why I'm here."

Smoke's eyes narrowed, disgust mixing with pain.

"You here for what?" Smoke snapped. "Forgiveness? Is that what this is? You think you can walk in here, cry, and we're supposed to—what—pat you on the fucking back and tell you it's all right?"

Remmick flinched like he'd been struck.

"No," Remmick rasped. "No. I don't—I don't think it's all right."

Sammie's voice came like ice.

“Then *leave*.”

Remmick’s gaze snapped to Sammie, pleading.

“I *can’t*,” Remmick replied, and the words came out broken. “I can’t just walk away like I didn’t—”

Smoke moved. *Fast*. He reached down with his hand disappearing under the edge of the table —Remmick didn’t even see where the gun came from until it was up and pointed straight at his chest. The whole room froze around it. Smoke’s eyes were dead calm now, that was the scariest part.

“*Get*. *Out*,” Smoke said through clenched teeth.

Remmick stared at the gun and his breath stuttered. He believed, in that moment, Smoke could do anything, kill him again, make it worse. So Remmick didn’t move. His voice cracked into a sob he couldn’t hold back.

“No,” Remmick whispered tearfully.

Smoke’s mouth curled with pure, exhausted hatred.

“You want me to fucking do it twice?” Smoke asked. “’Cause I swear to you, I’ll find a way.”

Remmick’s tears spilled harder. He shook his head, desperate, his voice breaking into pleading.

“*Please*,” Remmick said. “Just—just let me say it. Let me say I’m sorry because I *mean* it. Let me—”

Smoke’s patience snapped like a bone. He crossed the room in three hard strides, grabbed Remmick by the front of his shirt, and shoved him backward with a violent force that stole his footing. Remmick stumbled, boots sliding, catching himself on the doorframe for half a second—Then Smoke pushed him hard out the back door like he was trash being thrown into daylight. Remmick hit the porch steps hard. He fell onto the sand and sat there stunned, his hands trembling, his breath knocked loose. Smoke stood in the doorway above him, his gun still in hand, and his face carved into a single expression: *no***.** Remmick looked up, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Smoke—*please*,” Remmick choked out through sobs. “Please—”

Smoke’s jaw clenched.

“Get *off* my porch!” Smoke cut in, his voice low. “Get *away* from my family.”

Remmick crawled forward on his knees without thinking, his palms pressing into sand, like his body remembered praying.

“*Please*,” Remmick sobbed again. “Please just—let me—let me try. Let me fix this. *Please*.”

Smoke's eyes didn't soften. They hardened as he stepped back. Remmick lunged forward, panic cracking his voice.

"Smoke—wait—*please*—"

The door slammed. The sound hit like a judge's gavel. *Final*. Remmick froze with his hands on the closed door, his forehead dropping against it as if he could press his regret through the wood and into their warm room. He sobbed loudly now, helpless and ripped from the chest.

"*Please*," Remmick begged, his voice cracking into hoarseness. "Please. *Please*. Just—"

Nothing, only the ocean hush. Only the wind. Only the muffled echo of laughter inside that didn't come back for him. Remmick slid down the door until he was kneeling in the sand, his shoulders shaking so hard it looked like the world was trying to break him in half. His hands clenched into fists, then opened, then clenched again. A man trying to hold onto anything when the last thing he wanted—*violence*—was the only thing he'd ever been good at. He sobbed until his throat burned, until his chest hurt, until the sun above him felt like a spotlight he didn't deserve. And when the sobs finally softened into ragged breathing, Remmick stayed there anyway—on his knees at the door of a house full of the people he'd damned—like punishment was the only prayer he trusted. The door never opened.

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Scene Song: "I Will Find You" ~ Clannad

Remmick didn't know how long he stayed there—his knees in the sand, his breath shredding his throat—until the sun shifted and the world around him started feeling too big to hold what he was carrying. He finally pushed himself up like a man dragging his own body out of a grave. The back door stayed shut, no footsteps, no forgiveness, no voice on the other side of the wood. Remmick stumbled away from the house on legs that felt borrowed. He walked with his head down, shoulders tight, as if the air itself might spit on him. The beach stretched wide and bright and cruelly beautiful—Pelmont's favorite kind of mercy: the kind that didn't let you hide. Out ahead, a dock reached into the ocean like a finger pointing at nowhere. Remmick headed towards it.

His boots thudded against the weathered boards. Each step sounded too loud in the clean morning. The dock trembled slightly under him, and he gripped the railing—not because he needed balance, but because his hands needed something solid to keep him from tearing himself apart. He stopped at the end and stared down into the water. The ocean rolled beneath him, dark blue and bottomless, the surface flashing sunlight like a blade being turned. His eyes burned again. He swallowed hard as his jaw clenched, and he squeezed his eyes shut like he could crush memory back into silence. Instead, memory opened, not a gentle thing, not a recollection, a *living vision*—sharp enough to cut. He was back in a yard in Dublin—

green grass, damp air, the smell of earth and peat smoke and bread. A small stone house behind him, ivy clawing at the walls like it belonged there. The sky was gray-blue, soft with evening, and the world was warm because his family was in it.

His mother laughed—full-bodied, careless, *alive*. His father spun her in the yard like the world hadn't yet learned how to take things. Their laughter made the air feel holy. And there was *Róisín*, seven years old, long red hair falling down her back like a river of fire, a white dress that fluttered when she danced, bare feet in the grass, cheeks pink with joy. She spun in circles, arms out, dizzy and delighted, calling for her big brother Remmick to join her—calling him like the world would never end. Remmick—only a man then—smiled with happiness. He stepped toward her, then the vision *turned*. The yard didn't fade. It didn't blur. It was invaded.

Men burst in like wolves—pale faces under iron helmets, rough wool and leather and metal, shields scarred, boots stomping through the grass like they owned it. Torches. Blades. Spearheads catching the last light. And in Remmick's mind—because trauma was sloppy and modern and cruel—some of the metal flashed like guns. Not because it was true, but because his soul had learned the shape of violence and translated it into the language he understood. They grabbed his father first—two of them pinning his arms. His father fought like a man trying to keep the world intact with his hands. Another seized his mother by the hair; she screamed, kicked, clawed, and refused to go quiet. Róisín froze, then she screamed, not a small scream, a scream that ripped the sky open. She ran at them—tiny fists pounding uselessly against grown men in armor, sobbing and hitting and begging them to let go, begging like a child who still believed adults stopped when you asked them to.

"Dad! Mammy!" she cried, her voice breaking. "Stop—stop it! *Stop*!"

Remmick lunged forward in the vision, but his feet moved like he was underwater. His body felt locked, trapped behind the glass of his own eyes. One of the men turned. He didn't look surprised. He looked *irritated*, like a child's crying was an inconvenience. Róisín hit his arm again, desperate, small hands smearing tears on iron and leather. And then—a flash, a brutal sound like the world cracking. Róisín jerked. Her white dress bloomed red at the chest like a flower made of ruin. Her eyes went wide—confused more than afraid, like she couldn't understand why the world would do that to her. She fell into the grass. Her long red hair spread out behind her like spilled blood's cousin. The yard went silent in the way a place goes silent when God leaves.

Remmick's mother made a noise that wasn't human, his father roared. And Remmick—brother, son, man—felt something inside him split so violently that it was as if his soul had been torn into two pieces and neither piece knew how to live. The vision snapped away. Remmick's eyes flew open. The ocean was back, the dock was back. But the sound—her scream, the crack, the silence—was still inside him, lodged in his ribs like shrapnel. Remmick made a noise that tore out of his throat without permission—half scream, half heart shattering grief—and dropped to his knees on the boards.

"NO!" he roared, his voice carrying out over the water like a curse thrown at heaven.

His hands slammed against the dock once—hard—then grabbed the edge like he meant to tear it apart. His face turned red, his veins lifted along his neck as if his body was trying to

force the pain out through his skin. The sobs came vicious and uncontrolled—great, heaving convulsions that made him fold forward, shoulders shaking so hard it looked like he might break in half. He cried the way a man cries when he's not trying to be dignified anymore. He cried like a man watching a white dress turn red. Behind him, footsteps approached on the boards, measured, unhurried, not sneaking, a presence that didn't care if it was heard. Remmick didn't look back. He couldn't, but he *felt* it—someone standing a few feet away, watching, not with pity but with recognition.

Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal stood behind him, his tiara catching the sun like it was mocking the concept of shame, his tracksuit zipped up halfway, his chains around his neck glistening, his rings flashing every time his hands flexed at his sides. Jimmy didn't move closer. He didn't touch him. He didn't offer softness. He just stared at Remmick kneeling at the edge of the world and frowned—deep, slow—because the scene was familiar in a way Jimmy hated: a man *wrecked*, a man begging the universe to undo something it never undid. Jimmy's jaw tightened like he could still feel rope on his wrists and wood beneath his back and the sky upside down. Remmick's sobbing hitched. He dragged in air like it was razor wire. Jimmy spoke at last and his voice wasn't gentle. It was low, *rough*, controlled. It was a Scottish bite wrapped around each word.

"You done?" Jimmy asked, not cruel, and not mocking.

It was a hard question, asked the way a hard man checks if you're still alive. Remmick shook his head violently, tears flinging off his lashes. His voice broke when he tried to answer.

"No," Remmick choked. "No, I can't—"

Jimmy's eyes narrowed, not in anger—assessment.

"Right," Jimmy said, "so you're still in it."

Remmick's hands clenched on the boards until his knuckles went white.

"I saw her," Remmick sobbed, his voice thick with that Southern drawl under the Irish. "I saw my sister. I saw—"

Jimmy cut in, sharp but not brutal.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I know what that is."

Remmick froze for half a second, like his grief had hit a wall. Jimmy's voice stayed low—flat enough to be safe, hard enough to be real.

"It doesn't stop just because you're dead," Jimmy said, "that's the joke."

Remmick's breathing rattled. Jimmy took one step closer—still leaving space, still not touching Remmick.

"You can scream at the ocean all you want," Jimmy said, his eyes on Remmick like a blade held steady. "It's not gonna give her back."

Remmick's shoulders shook harder, and something like rage tried to crawl into the grief. Jimmy's tone sharpened—warning, not attack.

"And if you're thinking about jumping," Jimmy added, "*don't*."

Remmick's head snapped slightly, like he'd been caught doing something shameful.

"Not because I care about your dramatic bullshit," Jimmy said, "but because there's nowhere to go. You'll just wake up again, still you, still carrying it."

Remmick swallowed, his sobs turning rougher. Jimmy watched him for a long beat, then spoke again, quieter—still not soft.

"You want to punish yourself," Jimmy said, "I get it."

Remmick let out a broken sound, half laugh, half sob.

"You *don't*—" Remmick rasped.

Jimmy's eyes flashed, and for one second the old Sir Lord was there—steel and command and a stare that could make grown men shrink.

"I *do*," Jimmy snapped. "I died on a *fuckin*' cross asking why I couldn't hear my father. You think you're the only one who's ever been left with nothing but memory?"

Remmick's breathing stalled. Jimmy exhaled through his nose, his gaze cutting toward the horizon like he was disgusted by how beautiful it was. Then he looked back down at Remmick.

"But listen," Jimmy said, his voice dropping, dangerous in its steadiness, "you're not gonna stand at the edge of this place and pretend your pain makes you special."

Remmick flinched. Jimmy didn't let up, but he didn't kick him either.

"Pain's common," Jimmy said, "what matters is what you do next."

Remmick's throat bobbed. Tears slid down his face in silent lines now, quieter but heavier. He wiped his face with the heel of his palm like it offended him to be seen crying.

"I don't know what to do next," Remmick tearfully whispered.

Jimmy's stare held him, then Jimmy spoke like a man admitting something he hated.

"Neither did I," Jimmy said, "at first."

The ocean hissed below them like it was listening. Jimmy angled his chin back toward the shore—toward the house Remmick had been thrown out of.

"You went begging," Jimmy said. "How'd that go?"

Remmick's mouth twisted as shame came flooding back in. Jimmy's eyes narrowed.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, “exactly.”

Remmick swallowed hard.

“They should’ve killed me again,” Remmick said, his voice cracking.

Jimmy’s lips curled with contempt—at the idea, at the self-pity, at the instinct to make it simple.

“They already did,” Jimmy said, “now you’ve got the harder part.”

Remmick looked up at him—eyes wet, raw, searching. Jimmy didn’t smile. He didn’t offer a hand, but his presence was an anchor anyway—solid, *real*.

“The harder part is living with what you did,” Jimmy said, “without becoming it again.”

Remmick’s breath shuddered. Jimmy’s gaze flicked once, measuring him.

“Get up,” Jimmy said.

Remmick hesitated. Jimmy’s voice sharpened—command without cruelty.

“*Get up*,” Jimmy repeated, “unless you want the ocean to watch you cry all day.”

Remmick’s hands trembled as he pushed himself to his feet. His legs were unsteady, but he stood. Jimmy nodded once, like: *good*. Then Jimmy turned slightly, not fully facing the house, not fully facing the sea—standing between both like a guard who didn’t ask to be assigned.

“You’re Remmick,” Jimmy said. “Right?”

Remmick wiped his face again, his jaw tight.

“Yeah,” Remmick responded in a low tone.

Jimmy’s eyes flashed.

“I’m Jimmy,” he said, like the name was a weapon and a confession at the same time, “and if you’re gonna do this—if you’re gonna try and be something other than what you were—then you’re gonna learn something quick.”

Remmick swallowed.

“What?”

Jimmy leaned in just enough that Remmick could feel the heat of him—controlled menace, not threat.

“You don’t beg men like Smoke for mercy,” Jimmy said, “not right now, not when they’re still bleeding inside. You earn space. *Quietly*, over time. You stay where they can see you and you don’t make them feel hunted.”

Remmick's eyes narrowed, pained.

"So I just…wait?"

Jimmy's stare turned colder.

"You wait," he said, "you work, you shut up, and you don't ask for applause."

Then, because Jimmy was still Jimmy, his mouth twitched with that razor-thin swagger.

"And if you turn into a vampire again," Jimmy added, "I'll personally fuckin' kick you into the ocean for being annoying."

Remmick let out a broken laugh through his tears. It wasn't joy, but it was a crack in the wall. Jimmy watched that crack like it mattered, then looked away like he didn't want to admit he'd seen it.

"Come with me," Jimmy said, nodding toward the shore, "get off the dock."

Remmick hesitated, his voice small but not weak.

"Why are you doing this?" Remmick asked. "Why are you helping me?"

Jimmy paused. For half a second, the wind tugged at the tiara and the chains like the world was trying to mock him for being here, for helping. Jimmy didn't look back when he answered.

"Because I know what it feels like," Jimmy said, his voice hard, "to be on your knees and realize you can hear yourself clearly for the first time."

Remmick's throat tightened. Jimmy started walking. Remmick followed, not comforted, not forgiven, but no longer alone at the edge of the water. They walked off the dock in silence at first, not awkward silence, not polite silence, but the kind of silence men carry when they've both seen too much and don't trust words not to cheapen it. Remmick's eyes were still wet, his face was still flushed from that scream, from grief tearing through him like barbed wire. He kept wiping his tears away with the heel of his hand like he hated that his body was betraying him in daylight. Jimmy didn't comment on the tears. Jimmy didn't slow down for them either. He walked at an even pace, but he angled himself just enough that Remmick stayed on the inside, away from the edge of the water. It wasn't a dramatic move. It was the kind of protection you only notice if you've needed it before. Remmick finally broke the silence, his voice hoarse, his Southern drawl tugging under the Irish.

"You talk like you've done this before," Remmick muttered.

"I have," Jimmy responded without looking over.

Remmick exhaled shakily, a bitter sound.

"You got your people back?" Remmick asked, and there was no jealousy in it—just a tired, broken wonder. "*They* slammed rejection in my face."

Jimmy's jaw tightened, not at Remmick, but the memory of that rejection, at how familiar it was.

"I didn't get my family back," Jimmy said. "not my mother, my sisters or my father, but instead I got a gift in the form of a new sister. And slamming rejection in your face—that they did."

Remmick stopped walking for half a second, like the shame physically grabbed his ankles. Jimmy stopped too—two steps ahead—then turned his head just enough to look back, his eyes sharp.

"What," Jimmy asked, his voice flat, "you done already?"

Remmick's nostrils flared. He hated how close he was to falling apart again.

"No," Remmick rasped. "I'm…I'm just—"

Remmick swallowed hard.

"I'm not used to anyone…standin' near me when I'm like this."

Jimmy stared at him a beat, then scoffed quietly.

"Right," Jimmy said,"well get used to it."

Remmick blinked, caught. Jimmy turned back toward the shoreline and started walking again like he hadn't just said something enormous. Remmick followed because he didn't know what else to do but keep moving. After a minute, Remmick's voice came again, smaller.

"I don't belong here," Remmick said.

Jimmy's response was instant, annoyed in the way truth could be annoying.

"Don't start," Jimmy said.

Remmick's brow pinched.

"I mean it," Remmick said.

Jimmy stopped and turned fully this time. The sun hit the rings on his fingers and made them flash like tiny knives.

"Listen," Jimmy said, stepping closer—not crowding, just closing the distance enough that Remmick couldn't drift off into his own spiral, "I said don't start because I've heard that shite before."

Remmick's throat bobbed. Jimmy's eyes held his, unblinking.

"*I* said it," Jimmy continued, "over and over. 'I don't belong here.' 'I don't deserve to be here.' Turns out, that's just shame trying to sound like logic."

Remmick's eyes clouded again, but he didn't drop. He just stood there, breathing, taking the hit. Jimmy nodded once like: *good. Stay standing.*

"Smoke looked at me like I was still…that thing," Remmick said, his voice cracking.

Jimmy's gaze sharpened.

"Because to him, you are."

Remmick flinched.

"Not forever though," Jimmy said, "but right now? You're the worst day of their fuckin' lives wearing your own face."

Remmick's shoulders shook, but he stayed upright. Tears slipped out anyway, quieter now, like leakage. Jimmy's voice dropped—still tough, but the edges softened into something steadier.

"That doesn't make you evil," Jimmy said, "It makes you…*responsible.*"

"I know," Remmick said before clenching his jaw.

Jimmy nodded.

"Good. Then don't go groveling again, not yet."

Remmick's eyes flashed with pain.

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do?"

Jimmy's stare turned sharp again—swagger coming back like a blade sliding into a sheath.

"You're gonna do what I did," Jimmy said. "You're gonna survive the part where *nobody* wants you."

Remmick swallowed.

"That's not—"

"It *is*," Jimmy cut in, "because that's where the real change happens, not when people clap for you, but when they don't."

Remmick's breath hitched. Jimmy leaned in slightly, his voice lower, controlled, like he was speaking to the part of Remmick that wanted to crumble.

"From what I know about you, you apparently wanted fellowship," Jimmy said, "you want love, fine, but you don't get it by demandin' it, and you don't get it by crawling."

Remmick's brows knit—wounded pride sparking under the grief. Jimmy saw it and nodded like he approved.

“There it is,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and half smile, “that’s the *man*, not the hunger, not the costume. *You*.”

“What?” Remmick asked with his eyes narrowed, confused.

Jimmy shrugged.

“I’m not gonna treat you like a dog.”

Remmick’s throat tightened. Jimmy’s face stayed hard, but his voice held something firm under it—certainty.

“You’re not a kick-around,” Jimmy said, “you’re just wrecked.”

Remmick laughed once, broken.

“That’s putting it lightly,” Remmick responded.

Jimmy’s mouth twitched.

“I’ve seen lighter wrecks,” Jimmy said dryly, “usually they’re dead.”

Remmick huffed a shaky breath that wasn’t quite a laugh but he wanted it to be. Jimmy pointed his chin toward the far end of the beach, away from the house, where a stretch of sand curved into quieter dunes.

“Come on,” Jimmy said, “keep walking with me.”

Remmick hesitated.

“Where we goin’?”

Jimmy started walking again like it was obvious.

“Nowhere,” Jimmy said, “that’s the point.”

They walked along the shoreline where the surf hissed and fell back, hissed and fell back. Remmick’s breathing steadied a fraction. His tears slowed, not because the pain was gone—because his body was finally remembering it didn’t have to fight for air. After a while, Remmick spoke again, voice low.

“I wasn’t evil,” Remmick said, like he needed to say it out loud to someone who wouldn’t laugh. “I wasn’t born like that.”

Jimmy didn’t hesitate.

“No,” he said, “you weren’t, neither was I.”

Remmick blinked hard, surprised by the certainty. Jimmy kept his eyes forward, voice steady.

“Evil’s when you enjoy the damage,” Jimmy said, “when you *want* it, when you’d do it again sober.”

Remmick’s hands curled into fists.

“I *did* enjoy it,” Remmick replied, “sometimes. That’s what—”

Jimmy cut his gaze to him—sharp, not unkind.

“Yeah,” Jimmy cut in, “because you were mentally sick and starving for connection and power and you found a way to feel full for once. Don’t pretend you’re the first bastard in history to mistake hunger for destiny.”

Jimmy continued, his voice low, almost contemptuous of the universe itself.

“You wanted a family,” Jimmy said. “You wanted to belong to something. And the world taught you you only get that by takin’ it.”

Remmick’s eyes watered again, but this time it wasn’t only guilt—it was *recognition*, being *seen* without being excused. Jimmy’s shoulders lifted in a small shrug.

“It’s ugly,” Jimmy said, “but it’s human.”

“So what am I now?” Remmick whispered.

Jimmy’s answer came simple and solid.

“A man,” Jimmy said, “a man with a lot to answer for.”

“And you?” Remmick asked after swallowing hard.

Jimmy’s lips curled faintly, swagger like a cigarette ember in the dark.

“I’m a man too,” Jimmy said, “same problem, only mine is almost close to disappearin’.”

Then Jimmy glanced sideways at Remmick, eyes sharp.

“And here’s the part you’re gonna hate,” Jimmy added, “you’re gonna live long enough to earn better.”

Remmick’s brow furrowed.

“How?”

Jimmy’s voice hardened—not icy, just firm.

“By not running,” Jimmy said, “by not hiding, by not making them carry your guilt for you.”

Remmick’s throat bobbed.

“They don’t want me near them.”

Jimmy nodded once.

“Good. Then don’t go near them.”

Remmick’s face tightened.

“That sounds like giving up.”

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed.

“No. It’s respect.”

Remmick stared, listening. Jimmy gestured back toward the distant house with a flick of his ringed hand.

“You keep a distance they can breathe in,” Jimmy said. “You show up in this realm and you don’t make it *their* problem. You do the work where they can see it without you forcing your face into their day.”

Remmick’s jaw clenched.

“Work like what?”

Jimmy’s gaze swept the shoreline, the realm too perfect, too bright.

“For you? I don’t know yet,” Jimmy admitted. And then, because honesty didn’t come naturally to men like him, he added sharply: “But we’ll find it.”

Remmick looked at him.

“*We*?”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched.

“Yeah. We.”

Remmick’s eyes searched Jimmy’s face like he was trying to figure out what game this was. Jimmy met the stare and didn’t flinch.

“I’m not adopting you,” Jimmy said, like he needed to make that clear, “don’t get fuckin’ weird.”

Remmick let out a ragged laugh. Jimmy kept going, his voice steady—swagger on top, backbone underneath.

“I’m doing this,” Jimmy said, “because I know what it is to wake up and realize the monster was you the whole time…and still have to live with yourself afterward.”

Remmick’s eyes burned again. Jimmy’s voice dropped, quieter—still hard, but now it carried that *I understand* type of energy.

“And because if you stay in front of that door begging,” Jimmy said, “you’re gonna break yourself into something worse.”

Remmick swallowed.

“I already feel broke.”

Jimmy’s stare held him.

“Good,” Jimmy said, “then you’ve got nothin’ left to protect except what you become next.”

Remmick’s breathing steadied. His shoulders lowered a fraction. Jimmy nodded toward the water again, then toward the land—like pointing out the two options.

“You can drown in memory,” Jimmy said, “or you can use it.”

Remmick’s voice came small.

“Use it how?”

Jimmy’s smile flashed—quick, dangerous, familiar.

“Like fuel,” Jimmy said, “like spite, like a vow.”

Remmick stared with a saddened frown. Jimmy’s smile faded into something sober and real.

“I got through it,” Jimmy said, “so you’re gonna get through it too.”

Remmick’s eyes widened slightly at the directness. Jimmy immediately hardened it with attitude, like he refused to let it sound like a hug.

“Not because you deserve a happy ending,” Jimmy added, “but because you don’t get to die and escape the bill.”

Remmick breathed out a shaky laugh—half pain, half relief. Jimmy walked on, and Remmick walked beside him, not healed, not forgiven, but held upright by something sturdier than softness: a hard man who’d already walked through the same fire and decided, stubbornly, to keep walking.

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Scene Song: “Didn’t Cha Know” ~ Erykah Badu

Jimmy's house sat back from the shoreline, clean lines and bright windows like it had been designed for people who didn't carry blood in their memories. Remmick followed him up the steps anyway, his shoulders still tight, his eyes still bruised from crying, his boots tracking sand like evidence. He didn't say welcome. He didn't do soft. He just held the door open and jerked his chin toward the hallway like a man letting someone into a bunker, not a home.

"Right," Jimmy said, shutting the door behind them, "first thing."

Remmick glanced around, wary.

"What?"

Jimmy looked him up and down with a blunt, assessing stare—wet hair at the temples from the dock mist, salt dried on his skin, grief still clinging to him like a thick, iron-scented sweat.

"You smell like the ocean and regret," Jimmy said. "Get in the shower."

Remmick's mouth twitched, almost offended.

"I'm fine."

Jimmy's stare didn't blink.

"No," he said flatly, "you're *not*, and you're not walking around my house lookin' like you crawled out of a grave, either."

Remmick huffed a breath that was almost a laugh, but it cracked halfway. Jimmy turned and strode toward a closet, yanking it open like he was mad at the concept of doors. He grabbed a folded denim shirt—button-down, clean, soft, new-looking—and tossed it at Remmick's chest, then jeans, then a fresh pair of sneakers that looked like they hadn't yet learned what dirt was. Remmick caught everything awkwardly. Jimmy pointed up the stairs with a ringed hand.

"Bathroom's upstairs, second door down the hall."

Remmick hesitated.

"You…got all this just—"

Jimmy cut him off instantly.

"Don't make it weird," Jimmy snapped. Then, a beat later, like he couldn't help the swagger: "I've got taste, all right? You're not gonna dress like a depressed funeral."

Remmick stared, then nodded once—small and grateful without saying the word. He started up the stairs. Jimmy watched him go, his expression tight—not pity but just calculation, the way you watch a man who might collapse if he stops moving. At the top of the stairs, Remmick paused and looked back down.

“Why’re you doin’ this?” Remmick asked, his voice low, that slight Southern pull under the Irish.

Jimmy leaned against the wall like he owned it, his chains caught the light.

“Because you’re not the only bastard who’s been wrecked,” Jimmy said, “now go wash and get clean before I change my mind.”

Remmick disappeared down the hall. A few minutes later, water started running. Jimmy stood in the living room, staring out the window toward the beach, jaw working like he was chewing on something sharp. He didn’t look relaxed. He looked like a man who had decided to hold a line and was now waiting to see if the universe would test it.

Scene Song: “Rhinestone Eyes” ~ Gorillaz

Then came the knock at Jimmy’s door, not loud and not urgent either. Jimmy opened it. Cathy stood on the porch with her arms folded, her hair pulled back, her expression sharp in that familiar way—like her face had forgotten how to relax even though her body was finally safe. She held a little ceramic cup in her hand like it was evidence.

“Jimmy,” she said.

Jimmy looked her up and down, his rings catching the light as he leaned against the doorframe.

“Cathy,” he replied, his tone dry, “what’s this? A friendly visit? Should I be alarmed?”

She rolled her eyes with a faint smile.

“I need a cup of sugar.”

Jimmy blinked once, then his mouth curled into that obnoxious Sir Lord smile—half swagger, half comedy, all audacity.

“A *cup*?” he repeated. “What are you doing, Cathy—summoning a demon or baking a cake? Because I feel like both of those end with you yelling at someone.”

Cathy laughed lightly, but she was already smiling. She stepped forward and gave him a light smack on the upper arm—playfully, not mean.

“Shut up,” she said, laughing again. “Sasha said you had some.”

Jimmy recoiled dramatically like he’d been wounded.

“Sasha’s out here telling people I’m the local sugar dealer now? Brilliant.”

Cathy lifted the cup in her hand.

“I’m making a cake. Tom’s birthday is Friday and I ran out.”

Jimmy’s brows lifted.

“Right. Of course. Tom’s birthday. I was wondering what fresh chaos the week was gonna bring.”

Cathy sighed like she’d been holding it in for months.

“I didn’t feel like going to the store,” she added.

Jimmy tilted his head.

“And you didn’t just use thought-intention to manifest more?”

Cathy’s face tightened instantly, like he’d just suggested she commit a crime.

“No,” she said flatly.

Jimmy’s mouth twitched.

“Why not?”

Cathy stepped onto the threshold a little more, dropping her voice like she was sharing a secret that everyone in Pelmont already knew.

“Because thought-intention is not a vending machine, Jimmy,” she said, “and because the last time I tried to manifest ingredients with my head still full of *stress*, the flour came out damp and tasted like ocean air.”

Jimmy barked a laugh.

“So you made haunted bread.”

“I made *sad* bread,” Cathy corrected, “and I’m not doing that to Tom on his birthday.”

Jimmy’s grin widened.

“Fair. Nobody deserves emotionally compromised sponge cake.”

Cathy smacked his arm again, lighter this time.

“Just give me the sugar.”

Jimmy let her in with an exaggerated flourish like he was welcoming royalty into his kingdom.

“Come inside,” he said, mock-formal, “the Palace of Questionable Hospitality.”

As Cathy stepped into the entryway, the shower upstairs continued, steady and loud. Cathy's eyes flicked briefly toward the ceiling.

"You got someone here?" she asked, guarded by reflex.

Jimmy didn't answer right away. His expression shifted—small, subtle—like a lock clicking.

"Yeah," he said, "a man who's going through some things and needs a minute."

"A new arrival to the realm?" she asked.

Jimmy sighed, then nodded, his expression turning serious.

"Aye," he replied, "a new arrival seeking forgiveness and redemption—like I was."

Cathy studied his face, then nodded with understanding. Jimmy went to the kitchen and grabbed a bag of sugar from the pantry. He filled Cathy's cup, then slid it toward her like he was conducting an exchange of contraband.

"There," he said with a faint frown and a half smile, "one cup of sugar. Use it wisely. Don't get arrested."

Cathy laughed, took the cup, and gave him an amused smile.

"You're absolutely ridiculous."

Jimmy leaned on the counter, his chains glinting.

"I'm a visionary."

Cathy's eyes narrowed.

"Sasha also told me to ask you something."

Jimmy sighed like the universe was personally inconveniencing him.

"Here we go."

"Are you coming to Tom's birthday on Friday?" Cathy asked.

Jimmy didn't hesitate.

"Yeah," he said. Then, with a faint smirk and that Sir Lord swagger slipping right back into place: "If there's alcohol, I'll be there. If there's no alcohol, I'll *still* be there—just in a worse mood."

Cathy laughed.

"There'll be alcohol."

"Good," Jimmy said, still smiling, "I'll bring my best personality."

Cathy turned to leave, sugar in hand. At the doorway, she paused, looking back at him with an expression that was almost soft—*almost*.

"You…okay?" she asked, careful.

"I'm alive," Jimmy said with a half smile.

Cathy nodded like she understood, and she *did*. Then she lifted the cup slightly in a little toast.

"See you Friday," she said.

Jimmy gave her a lazy salute with two ringed fingers.

"Don't poison the cake," he called after her, "or at least wait until after the candles."

Cathy flipped him off without looking back, resulting in him laughing. Jimmy watched her go, his amusement fading into something quieter. Upstairs, the shower still ran. Jimmy stared at the ceiling for a long beat, then muttered under his breath like a promise he didn't fully trust yet:

"All right. Get yourself together, Remmick."

Scene Song: "Didn't Cha Know" ~ Erykah Badu

The shower cut off upstairs. A few minutes later, footsteps moved down the hallway—measured, cautious—then down the stairs like the man wearing the new clothes wasn't fully convinced he had the right to. Remmick appeared at the bottom step in jeans that actually fit, a denim button-down that smelled like clean fabric and someone else's life, and sneakers that squeaked faintly on the polished floor like they were too new for him. Remmick paused, not because he was shy, but because the house looked…*lived-in*. A dish towel was folded neatly on the counter. A cup sitting by the sink with a dusting of sugar clinging to the inside rim—like some part of the day had been ordinary before he arrived and would be ordinary after, too. It hit him in the gut harder than the screaming had. Remmick's eyes flicked around the room like he'd stepped into a place that didn't belong to tragedy. Then his gaze landed on Jimmy—leaning against the kitchen counter like a man who was allergic to sitting down. Jimmy looked him over quickly—head to toe—then gave a short nod.

"Better," Jimmy said again, like he was grading a soldier.

Remmick ran his thumb along the cuff of the denim shirt, eyes narrowing.

"You got…company?"

Jimmy's mouth twitched.

“My neighbor Cathy stopped by.”

Remmick blinked.

“Cathy.”

Jimmy tilted his chin toward the sugar cup, casual.

“Borrowed sugar. Cake situation.”

Remmick stared at the cup, then at Jimmy, like his mind couldn’t stitch the idea of *cake* onto a world where his last memories were blood and screams.

“You have neighbors,” Remmick said quietly, and there was something in the way he said it that sounded almost like disbelief.

Jimmy scoffed with a brief and faint frown.

“Unfortunately.”

Remmick’s gaze lowered to the floor. His jaw tightened. The normalcy made the guilt sharper, not softer—because it proved there was a world where people laughed and planned birthdays and borrowed sugar…and he’d once walked into a room like that and ruined it. Jimmy clocked the shift in his face immediately. He didn’t ask if Remmick was okay. He shoved a mug toward him instead.

“Drink,” Jimmy said. “Coffee. Water. I don’t care. Pick something and put it in your body.”

Remmick’s eyes flicked up.

“You always order people around like this?”

Jimmy’s smile flashed—pure Sir Lord.

“I’m not cuddling you,” Jimmy said, “I’m directing traffic.”

Remmick huffed once—almost a laugh, then it fell apart into a breath before he took the mug anyway. Remmick’s hands shook slightly as he lifted it. Jimmy watched, then spoke without looking at him, his voice low but steady.

“Don’t let the normal stuff scare you,” Jimmy said. “It’s not a trap.”

Remmick’s throat tightened. Jimmy added, like he couldn’t stand the softness of his own sentence:

“It’s just…what we’re supposed to get back to, eventually.”

Remmick stared into the mug like it had answers.

“I don’t know how to *be* in a place like this,” Remmick admitted.

Jimmy's tone stayed blunt.

"You learn."

Remmick swallowed.

"They were eating together, laughing, like a family."

Jimmy's jaw worked.

"Yeah."

"And I—" Remmick's voice broke, almost, but then he caught it. "I walked in like poison."

Jimmy finally looked at him, his eyes hard but not cruel.

"Then stop acting like poison," Jimmy said, "act like a man."

Remmick flinched, but it landed right—because it wasn't an insult. It was a rope. Remmick nodded once, slowly. Jimmy pointed his mug at him like a warning.

"And no," Jimmy added, "you're not going back there today."

Remmick's eyes narrowed.

"I need to—"

"You *want* to," Jimmy corrected, "because you think suffering in front of them is payment."

Remmick's jaw clenched. Jimmy leaned forward slightly, rings flashing.

"It's not payment," Jimmy said, "it's pressure, and pressure makes people hate you more."

Remmick's shoulders tightened.
"So what do I do?"

"You let me handle the door," Jimmy responded, calm and brutal.

Remmick's brows pulled together.

"Why you?"

Jimmy's smile was thin.

"Because I'm not you," Jimmy said, "and because I'm not scared of being told to fuck off."

Remmick stared at him, then nodded—reluctant, but real. Jimmy snapped his fingers once, like a man calling a meeting to order.

"All right," Jimmy said, "we're doing this properly."

Jimmy grabbed his phone like it was a weapon and paced once across the kitchen, thinking. Remmick stood near the table like he was waiting to be sentenced. Jimmy typed with two thumbs, fast, decisive. Then he paused, deleted half of it, and started again. Remmick watched Jimmy, then his brows furrowed instantly.

“The hell is that?” Remmick asked, wary, “some kind of…mirror?”

Jimmy didn’t even look up, his thumbs moving fast.

“It’s a phone,” Jimmy said.

Remmick blinked.

“A what?”

Jimmy half smiled.

“A little box that lets you bother people from anywhere.”

Remmick stared harder, suspicious like the thing might bite him.

“That’s insane.”

Jimmy shrugged, still typing.

“Yeah. Humans invented it.”

Remmick leaned closer, eyes narrowing.

“And you’re sendin’…words through it?”

“Yep.”

“To Smoke?” Remmick asked.

“Yep.”

Remmick’s face twisted in disbelief.

“How is it that Smoke got one of those? And how do you even know how to contact him?”

Jimmy finally looked up, his eyes sharp and amused.

“Pelmont,” Jimmy responded, like that explained everything, “everyone gets updated.”

Remmick leaned back, offended on principle.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Jimmy went back to typing.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Jimmy said.

“Don’t be dramatic?” Remmick responded. “You’re tappin’ a demon slate to summon a man who put a gun to my face.”

Jimmy’s smile flashed—pure Sir Lord.

“First of all,” Jimmy said, with a smile that came close to turning into him laughing, “it’s not a demon slate, and secondly, never mind how I know how to contact him.”

Remmick scoffed.

“That’s creepy.”

“It’s efficient,” Jimmy corrected, thumbs still moving. “Gnosis. Intent. The realm basically hands you an address if you think hard enough.”

Remmick stared at him for a long second.

“This realm is nosy as hell,” Remmick muttered.

Jimmy briefly and lightly laughed.

“You’re gonna love it.”

Remmick glanced down at the phone in Jimmy’s hand.

“And what’re you even sayin’ to him?”

Jimmy’s eyes brightened with faint, obnoxious pride as he typed the opening line.

“‘Smoke. This is Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal,’” he read aloud.

Remmick’s mouth twitched.

“Your full name is *Sir Lord* Jimmy Crystal?”

“*Yeah*, it is,” Jimmy said with an offended frown.

“Are you—royalty or somethin’—”

“I was knighted by Queen Elizabeth and she gave me the Sir Lord title,” Jimmy fibbed, waving a hand like that settled it.

Remmick nodded with a faint frown and a brow raised.

“And you used your *full* name when you wrote to Smoke?” Remmick asked.

“Aye, I did. I’m not some anonymous bastard,” Jimmy replied with a roll of his eyes.

Remmick huffed a laugh.

“You’re unbelievable.”

Jimmy continued typing, his chains glinting when he shifted.

“Wait,” Remmick said, then pointed at the phone again. “Hold up. Humans really made these to…bother each other?”

Jimmy’s smile widened.

“Oh yeah,” he responded, “and then they used it to take photos of their food.”

Remmick’s face twisted in genuine shock.

“They did *what?*”

Jimmy nodded solemnly.

“Whole civilizations collapsed because of it.”

Remmick stared at him a beat, then shook his head slowly.

“Y’all deserved the apocalypse,” Remmick muttered.

Jimmy laughed once, sharply.

“Now you’re gettin’ it.”

Chapter 8

<u>Scene Song: "Fire In My Heart" ~ Escape From New York</u>

The knock that came wasn't friendly. It wasn't casual either. It was the knock of a man who arrived with his fists already clenched in his mind. Jimmy opened the door like he'd been expecting a war. Smoke stood there with Annie just behind his shoulder, their little girl not with them—thankfully. Stack and Cornbread hovered close with Sammie's eyes sharp and quick. Sammie's face was unreadable in that cold, sealed way. Delta Slim lingered behind them like a quiet warning. Their gaze slid past Jimmy instantly. Searching. When they saw Remmick seated in the living room—visible, still, hands resting flat on his thighs like he was presenting them for inspection—everybody's posture tightened. The room cooled without the sun changing. Jimmy didn't pretend he didn't notice.

"Come in," Jimmy said, "or don't. Your choice."

Smoke walked in first like the floor belonged to him. Stack followed. Sammie and Annie came next. Delta Slim last, eyes moving slowly like he was measuring exits. Jimmy shut the door behind them—but he didn't lock it. He made sure it was obvious. Remmick didn't stand. He didn't inch forward. He held himself still, his chin lifted, his eyes on Smoke like he was bracing for another stake. Smoke didn't sit. He stared at Remmick with that old, murderous focus—like he was trying to force the monster back into the man.

"What the fuck are you doin' here?" Smoke asked, voice low and brutal.

Remmick's throat worked.

"I—"

Jimmy cut in instantly.

"Before anybody starts," Jimmy said, "ground rules."

Smoke's eyes snapped to Jimmy like a blade.

"The fuck you mean ground rules?"

Jimmy didn't blink as he stepped up in Smoke's face, daringly.

"***My* fuckin'** house," Jimmy said—calm but *sharply*. "So *yeah*, *ground* rules. If that offends you, turn around and walk the fuck out *right now*. *I'm* not Sasha, I won't give a fuck if you do."

Smoke held the stare, cold and disrespectful. Jimmy held it back *harder*. Nobody in the room doubted for a second that Jimmy Crystal had once built a kingdom out of *fear*. Redemption

hadn't made him small. It had just made him *choose* where the violence went. Jimmy gestured once, slow and deliberate.

"Door stays unlocked," Jimmy said. "Nobody gets blocked in. Nobody touches anybody. Nobody pulls out a weapon. Nobody tries to 'teach a fuckin' lesson.'"

Smoke's jaw flexed. Jimmy's eyes narrowed.

"And *nobody* puts their hands on *him*," Jimmy added, nodding toward Remmick like the man was a volatile artifact.

Smoke's stare raked Jimmy up and down—chains, tiara, rings—like he was deciding how seriously to take a man dressed like that. Then Smoke's mouth curled.

"What?" Smoke said. "You his protector now?"

Jimmy gave Smoke his signature Sir Lord Jimmy death stare.

"I'm not his anything," Jimmy said. "I'm the wall between this conversation and a fuckin' execution in my living room. I got a lot of nice shit, and I'm not having it wrecked just because y'all wanna act like this is fuckin' Jerry Springer."

Stack shifted his weight, his eyes darting toward Remmick's hands again. Sammie stayed still, but his stare was surgical. Delta Slim let out a faint little breath that might've been amusement. Annie's gaze stayed on Remmick—not soft, but…*watchful*. Like she was reading the difference between a predator and a man caught inside his own shame. Jimmy turned and walked backward two steps. Then he sat, not on the couch, not in a normal chair. In **the yellow chair**—the same one from the film, the same posture, the same energy: Jimmy Crystal seated like a ruler watching court, his elbow on the armrest, his legs set, his rings glinting. He didn't sprawl. He *occupied* it. After picking up his diamond studded water bottle with the words "Sir Lord Jimmy" written along the side of it in big, bold, black cursive font, and taking a few sips of the liquid inside it, he looked from Smoke to Remmick like: *Go on. Do it. Say it.* Remmick swallowed hard and finally spoke.

Scene Song: "Gorta" ~ Chasing Abbey

"I don't expect forgiveness," Remmick said, his voice low—Irish bite with that slight Southern pull. "I don't even expect you to stay in the room."

Smoke's stare didn't change. Remmick kept his hands visible anyway, shoulders tight like he was bracing for a blow that never came.

"I woke up here," Remmick said, "and I don't know why I'm here. I saw y'all through the window and I came in because—because seein' you alive made what I did hit me like a hammer."

Sammie's mouth tightened. Stack's jaw clenched. Delta Slim watched like he was waiting for the hook. Smoke stepped half a pace closer.

"So what? You came to say fucking sorry?" Smoke asked, his voice sharp with contempt.

Remmick's eyes glistened, but he held the line.

"I came to own it," he said.

Delta Slim tilted his head.

"Own it," Slim repeated quietly, "that's a nice phrase."

"I'm not here to charm anyone," Remmick said as his eyes flicked to him.

"Good," Slim said as his mouth twitched.

Smoke's voice went darker.

"You remember what you did?" Smoke asked.

"Yeah," Remmick said, nodding once—fast, like he was ripping the bandage off.

Smoke leaned in like he wanted to smell the lie.

"Every bit of it?" Smoke pressed.

Remmick swallowed.

"Every face," Remmick said, voice roughening, "every scream, every second I thought I was…some kind of savior."

Stack's laugh was short and cold.

"You *weren't*."

"I know," Remmick replied instantly.

"And so you want what from us?" Smoke asked. "What the hell you want in this room?"

Remmick forced the words out.

"Nothing," he said, "not from you, not from Annie, not from any of you."

Smoke's brow furrowed—suspicious. Remmick continued, voice steadier with pain.

"I want a chance to exist in this realm without being hunted," Remmick said. "I want to earn the right to not be a threat anymore."

"You already were a damn threat," Stack said, icy.

“I was,” Remmick said. “I know. I need you all to understand that—I was in a lot of pain, pain that came from what was done to me and my family by colonizers—”

Smoke’s voice cut like a blade.

“*Don’t* talk about what was done to you,” Smoke interrupted. “Don’t nobody *care* about what was done to you! So don’t talk about colonizers and pain because you don’t know shit about pain!”

Remmick flinched—like the sentence struck him in the chest.

“Oh no,” Jimmy said—with his childish grin and his eyes glittering.

“Whew—whoo,” Jimmy added as his shoulders bounced, his head ticked side to side, and that bright, giddy laugh spilled out—completely wrong for the moment and completely Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, like the inner child in him was humorously losing it on purpose.

Remmick frowned in shock, and even Smoke’s face twisted into instant anger.

“The fuck is funny?” Smoke snapped.

“Nothin’,” Jimmy said, his voice light and wrong for the moment. He flicked his ringed hand once, dismissively. “It’s—” he swallowed, still smiling, “—it’s my head. It’s wrong sometimes.”

With a slight shake of his head, Remmick shut his eyes for half a beat—trying to block Jimmy’s bizarre moment out—then opened them again and looked straight at Smoke. His voice came quiet first. Controlled. Then it sharpened—passion pushing through the apology.

“You’re wrong,” Remmick said.

Smoke’s stare turned lethal.

“What the fuck you say?”

Remmick’s jaw clenched. His eyes stayed wet.

“I said you’re wrong,” Remmick repeated, his voice rising just enough to shake. “You *should* care. You don’t have to forgive me—hell, you don’t even have to like me—but you should *care* because what was done to me…what was done to my people…is part of why I did what I did to y’all.”

“*Don’t*,” Stack said as he took a step forward.

Sammie’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, don’t put that *shit* on us,” Sammie said.

Remmick’s hand trembled once at his side. He curled it into a fist and forced it open again—showing restraint like it physically hurt.

“I’m not sayin’ it *excuses* it,” Remmick said, his voice breaking. “I’m sayin’ it explains the hunger behind it. The desperation—”

“*Bullshit*!” Smoke snapped. “Desperation don’t give you the right to turn folks—”

“And you think I don’t *know* that?!” Remmick snapped loudly—then caught himself, swallowing hard like he hated his own volume. “I *know*! I—I *know* what I *took*.”

Remmick dragged in a breath, fighting for control.

“But you standin’ there tellin’ me that *I* don’t know pain?” Remmick said before expressing a laugh that came out sharp and wounded. “Smoke…you don’t know what it *is* to watch your family starve in their own home while soldiers stand outside like statues! You don’t know what it is to watch your people get treated like *animals* by men who talk about God and law while they burn the roof over your *head*! Or maybe you *do* know, you just care when it’s only happening to *you* and *your* people.”

“Man, go *on* somewhere with that,” Cornbread said after sucking his teeth and rolling his eyes. “Ain’t nobody in here got time for no sad story.”

Remmick turned to him—not with menace, with raw hurt.

“It wasn’t a damn sad story!” Remmick shouted, his voice full of emotion. “It was a slaughter stretched out slow!”

Annie’s face shifted slightly. Not forgiveness—something older. Recognition of brokenness. Remmick’s voice cracked, but he kept going.

“My parents,” Remmick said, the words hitting his mouth like glass, “my mother and father…they were *good people*, and then them British men came—uniforms, rifles, cold eyes, like we weren’t human enough to deserve mercy.”

Stack scoffed with a shake of his head.

“Oh, *save* it, Remmick!” Smoke shouted. “You talkin’ like you the only one ever to lose a fuckin’ family!”

“I never *said* that!” Remmick shouted, his nostrils flaring with anger.

“Then what you sayin’ then?!” Delta Slim shouted as he leaned back, his voice smooth and cutting. “That we owe you understanding ‘cause your ghost story’s got an accent?!”

Remmick’s throat bobbed as tears lightly thickened his voice.

“They *shot* my little sister,” Remmick said. “A *child*, a little girl with red hair and a white dress—who was cryin’ and beggin’ them to *stop*. They shot her like she was *nothin*’. And then they dragged my people off like *cattle*.”

Jimmy’s posture changed. A faint frown touched his face, and he went stilll—like something in that sentence snagged on an old nerve. His jaw tightened once, *hard*, and he shifted in the

chair like the cushions suddenly didn't feel right. The tiara glittered under the ceiling light while his expression turned flat and serious.

"Fuckin' hell," Jimmy breathed—quiet, rough—his eyes locked on Remmick now, unblinking. "That's…that's some fucked shite."

The room tightened. Even Smoke's posture shifted a fraction—like he didn't want to be moved but the image forced itself into him anyway.

"I watched hunger turn a village into ghosts," Remmick said, his voice completely tearful now, "not a quick death, not clean. Slow. *Quiet*. You'd hear it in the house—the stomach cryin' like an animal. You'd see mothers waterin' down soup until it was nothin' but hot grief. And outside…men in uniforms standin' there like the cold was part of their bones. They didn't have to fire a shot to kill you. They just watched you shrink."

Remmick swallowed hard, eyes glassy.

"And then they came for the roofs," Remmick went on. "Evictions—draggin' families out by the arms, tossin' what little they had into the mud. Some houses were set on fire, so there was no goin' back. Folks on their knees in the road beggin' like beggin' could stop a boot. And the soldiers? They'd stand there, rifles hangin' easy, watchin' it like it was damn weather."

Remmick's voice rose again, not loud—ferocious.

"And through all that, you think I didn't grieve?" Remmick said. "I grieved for days. Weeks. *Years*. My aunts, my uncles, my neighbors—gone. My *wife*—gone. A whole line of *names* wiped out."

Sammie's jaw clenched as he shook his head.

"Yeah and so you used that to justify comin' into our place and doin' what you did. Man, that's no damn excuse—"

"*No*, I used it to explain the sickness," Remmick shot back. "The curse. The thing that got put on me when I was already broken—"

"Ain't nobody put nothin' on you!" Smoke said, his stare hardening. "You *chose* to be a monster!"

"No!" Remmick shouted, and this time there was steel in it. "I became a monster because they *made* me one! Then it caused me to be *cut off*! Cut off from sunlight, from rest, from death, from the old ways my people believed could carry a soul home. I couldn't—I couldn't *reach* them!"

Remmick swallowed hard, his eyes shining.

"So I hunted fellowship any way I could," Remmick said. "I *listened* for it. I chased it. And when I heard Sammie's music—when I felt it—"

"*No*!" Sammie shouted, his head snapping up, "Don't you say my name like that!"

Remmick held his gaze anyway.

“Your music felt like a *door*, Sammie,” Remmick said. “It felt—it felt like a bridge I could crawl across. Like maybe—maybe I could find my *people* again.”

“So you selfishly used us?” Smoke said, his voice pure venom.

Remmick flinched—then forced the truth out.

“Yeah,” Remmick responded. “I did—”

“Then say that shit and stop dressin’ it up like you some tragic hero!” Smoke snapped loudly.

“I’m *not* dressin’ it *up*!” Remmick snapped—then his voice broke into something rougher, wounded. “I’m tellin’ you what it *felt* like! You don’t have to forgive me, but don’t fuckin’ *stand* there and tell me I don’t know *pain*!”

“And what about *our* pain?! Huh?!” Smoke shouted, stepping closer again, his eyes burning. “Because you and I *both* know that me and my people’s pain ain’t your damn business!”

Remmick’s breath came shaky.

“It is if it’s the same damn *cage*,” Remmick responded, his voice low. “It is if *all* of us got our lives shaped by men who thought they had the right to own us. Smoke, you *want* your people and mine to be different from each other, but we’re *not*.”

The words landed like a spark in dry air.

“Ain’t this something, this man really tryin’ to make himself one of us,” Cornbread muttered bitterly with a shake of his head.

Remmick shook his head hard.

“No,” Remmick replied. “I’m tryin’ to make you understand what I did wasn’t for fun. It was for survival, for *hope.*”

Smoke’s face twisted.

“No!” Smoke shouted. “Because hope don’t look like no damn blood!”

“I know,” Remmick said as his eyes flooded again.

Remmick swallowed, and the next words came out like a confession he hated.

“But—if I didn’t do what I did at Club Juke,” Remmick said, “you were gonna die *anyway* the next mornin’. Hogwood was *coming*. I *smelled* it. I *felt* it *and saw* it in Burt and Joan when I made them a part of my hive mind. Hogwood was gonna kill every last one of you.”

With his jaw flexing hard, Smoke shook his head while looking at Remmick with strong disdain.

“So your dumb ass solution was to turn us?”

“What was the alternative?” Remmick asked, tears spilling now. “You live and keep bein’ hunted by racist assholes? You go back to damn plantations? Back to chains? Back to men who’d work you to the damn bone and call it *order?*”

“We weren’t *goin*’ back,” Sammie said, his voice sharp.

“And where were you goin’ then?” Remmick shot back. “With what? With who? With the sun comin’ up and the Klan and Hogwood comin’ to slaughter every one of you, where were ya’ll goin’?”

Scene Song: “Together Forever” ~ Ludwig Goransson (Sinners Soundtrack)

Silence cracked through the room, heavy as stone. Smoke stared at Remmick like he wanted to kill him again and couldn’t decide if the truth was making him angrier. Annie’s expression shifted a fraction. Not forgiveness. Not softness—recognition that a soul could be broken without being born evil. Smoke’s jaw flexed again.

“And what if we never forgive you?” Smoke asked, quieter.

Remmick closed his eyes, his face displaying a faint frown of hurt.

“Then I live with it,” Remmick responded, “that’s the bill.”

The room went still. Even the ocean outside sounded far away. Jimmy stayed quiet in the yellow chair, watching. *Waiting*. Letting them say what they needed. Smoke stared at Remmick like he wanted to throw him through the wall. Then Smoke turned slightly—like he was done giving this any air.

“We’re *done*,” Smoke said in an icy tone.

Stack was already moving toward the door. Cornbread followed. Delta Slim stood last, eyes lingering on Remmick like he was filing the moment away as a song he didn’t want to sing yet. Sammie stayed cold, but he lingered a beat longer than the others—his eyes fixed on Remmick like he was trying to decide if the man in front of him was real or just another performance. Remmick watched them go, and something in his face changed—not rage. *Defeat*. That old familiar collapse: *Even now that I’m dead, I’m still the monster.* Remmick blinked hard, jaw clenching like he was holding back a shout, then he stood abruptly, chair scraping.

“Shit, forget it,” Remmick said, his voice strained—trying to keep dignity while his throat cracked. “Forget it. This was—this was stupid.”

Smoke didn't turn back. Remmick's eyes flashed toward Jimmy in the yellow chair—raw gratitude and humiliation mixed together.

"I tried," Remmick said, his voice breaking. "I tried like you said."

Jimmy didn't stand. He didn't rush. He just held Remmick's gaze—steady, unjudging, like: *I saw you stay in the room.* Remmick swallowed hard. Tears slipped despite his pride.

"Thank you," Remmick said to Jimmy, rough and quick like he had to get it out before he fell apart, "for tryin' on my behalf."

Jimmy's mouth twitched, swagger still alive even now.

"Don't get dramatic," Jimmy said quietly, "just go breathe."

Remmick nodded once, sharp—then turned to storm toward the door. He made it two steps.

"Remmick," Annie said.

Her voice stopped him like a hand on the chest. He froze with his back to her, his shoulders trembling as he was seconds away from breaking. Annie moved, not fast, not panicked, just decided. She reached out and lightly caught his forearm.

"Wait," she said—soft, not weak.

Remmick didn't turn. His breathing went ragged. He was fighting himself, fighting tears like they were an enemy. Annie stepped around until she was in front of him. Remmick's face was wrecked—jaw clenched, eyes glassy, pain shaking under his skin like a storm trying to break out. He kept his gaze down, like looking at her would *end* him emotionally. Annie studied him for a beat. Her frown softened—just slightly—into something that wasn't forgiveness yet. It was *truth*.

"You're different," Annie said quietly, "I can tell."

"Annie," Smoke said as his head snapped back.

She didn't look at Smoke. She kept her eyes on Remmick.

"In the world we came from," Annie said, voice low and thoughtful, "you *were* trapped, stuck between the living and the dead, always hungry, always chasing fellowship the only way you knew how."

Remmick's lip trembled. He tried to swallow it down and failed.

"*Don't*," Remmick rasped, his tearful voice raw. "*Don't* do that."

"Do what?" Annie asked softly.

"Don't make me *hope*," Remmick whispered, and the words came out like they hurt.

Annie's eyes narrowed with that quiet understanding she carried—like she could see the cage a soul lived in even when the body looked fine.

"I'm not promising you forgiveness," Annie said. "I'm not promising you closeness. You keep your distance. You don't come near my baby. You don't push. You don't demand."

Remmick nodded quickly, tears slipping despite him. He wiped them away hard and more followed.

"I won't," he said. "I swear."

Annie's voice stayed gentle, but firm.

"Don't swear," she corrected. "*Do*."

Remmick swallowed hard and nodded again.

"Yeah," he breathed.

Annie stepped back—her eyes wet, annoyed at her own softness. Smoke stood rigid, furious and conflicted, hands flexing like he wanted to drag her away and couldn't find a reason that didn't make him feel small.

"We're *leaving*," Smoke said.

Annie glanced at Remmick one last time—not forgiving, but not hunting. Then she turned and followed Smoke out. The door shut. Remmick stood in the middle of Jimmy's living room like a man who had just survived the edge of a cliff. Jimmy didn't stand right away. He sat in the yellow chair for a long beat, watching Remmick breathe. Then Jimmy finally spoke, his voice dry—swagger still there, but grounded.

"Well," Jimmy said. "You got stopped at the door. That's more than I got at my first meeting."

Remmick let out a broken, wet laugh through tears—quick, embarrassed, like he hated that sound coming out of him. Jimmy pointed at him with a ringed hand like an order.

"All right," Jimmy said. "Go eat something before you fall apart again. I've got a freezer full of microwave shite because I don't cook—I survive."

Remmick wiped his face hard, ashamed of the tears.

"And Remmick," Jimmy added, his voice lowering—serious underneath the swagger. "That was the first crack."

Remmick stilled.

"Don't ruin it by sprinting back to their door," Jimmy said.

Remmick shook his head, his breathing ragged but steadying.

“I won’t.”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched into a half-smile.

“Good,” Jimmy said. “Because I’m not hosting another fuckin’ pow-wow for at *least* a week. Shite, I see what Sasha said being a fuckin’ mediator for incoming souls can be tiring.”

Remmick let out a brief, quiet laugh as he wiped his face hard, embarrassed, like tears were a stain he could scrub off with his palms. Jimmy watched him a second too long from the yellow chair, then leaned forward and spoke like he was discussing plumbing.

“You got anywhere to go?” Jimmy asked.

Remmick’s throat worked. He hesitated, his eyes flicking toward the window like the ocean was the only answer he had left.

“No,” he said quietly, “not really.”

Jimmy clicked his tongue once, annoyed—not at Remmick, at the situation.

“Right,” Jimmy said, “then you’re staying here.”

Remmick blinked, caught off guard.

“What?”

Jimmy lifted a ringed hand like: D*on’t start making this emotional.*

“I’m not having you wandering around Pelmont looking like a stray dog,” Jimmy said, “and I’m not having you camp on the beach outside my house like a Victorian ghost either. You can sleep in the basement.”

Remmick’s brow furrowed.

“Basement?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy responded, “the basement. It’s basically a little suite—couch, bathroom, a door you can shut. Call it…a temporary dungeon.”

Remmick stared at him, a strange warmth hitting his face—something like being offered safety without being pitied.

“Thank you, but you don’t have to do that,” Remmick said.

Jimmy briefly and lightly laughed.

“I’m not doing it for your fuckin’ feelings. I’m doing it so I can keep an eye on you.”

Remmick half smiled.

“That’s your way of bein’ nice, huh?”

Jimmy leaned back in the yellow chair, smug.

“It’s my way of being *sane*,” Jimmy said. “Say yes before I regret it.”

Remmick swallowed. His voice came lower, sincere.

“…I’d rather say thank you,” Remmick said with a small, faint, friendly smile.

Jimmy waved it off like it offended him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jimmy muttered, “don’t make it weird. I told you before I’m not adopting you.”

Remmick gave a small, broken laugh, finally something real. Jimmy pointed at him again, bossy as ever.

“Eat,” Jimmy said, “then you’re coming with me.”

Remmick paused.

“Where we goin’?”

Jimmy stood, his chains shifting, his tiara catching the light like a crown that refused to quit.

“I’ve got to pick something up,” Jimmy said.

Remmick’s eyes narrowed.

“What?”

Jimmy’s smile flashed—pure Sir Lord trouble.

“A new subwoofer,” Jimmy said, “mine blew out.”

Remmick stared.

“A what?”

Jimmy blinked.

“Speakers. The big ones, the ones that make the world shake properly.”

Remmick’s frown deepened.

“Why?”

Jimmy looked genuinely offended by the question.

“Because silence is fuckin’ depressing,” Jimmy said. “Now come on. I don’t like people in my house alone—especially people I met an hour ago.”

Remmick huffed, amused despite himself.

“You don’t trust me.”

Jimmy’s eyes slid to him, smug.

“I trust you to be *dramatic*,” Jimmy said, “that’s different.”

Remmick laughed lightly and shook his head.

“All right,” Remmick said. “I can eat later. Let’s go get your…whatever the hell you called it.”

Jimmy clapped once, decisive.

“Good,” Jimmy said, “let’s go.

Scene Song: “Fade” ~ Kanye West (Extended Version)

Outside, Jimmy’s car sat in the driveway like a dare—candy-apple red, low and overbuilt, black rims like bruises, tinted windows hiding the inside like a secret. The kind of car that didn’t just *arrive* anywhere, it *announced* itself. When Jimmy hit the unlock, the lights blinked once like the thing was acknowledging its owner—then the driver’s door lifted upward on a hinge, dramatic as a wing. Remmick stopped and stared at it with briefly widened eyes.

“That yours?” Remmick asked.

“Of course it’s mine,” Jimmy said. “Get in before I change my mind and leave you waiting on the beach until I get back home.”

Remmick slid into the passenger seat cautiously, like he expected the leather to judge him. Jimmy dropped into the driver’s seat and started the engine with a grin that was almost boyish. Then the music hit. *Hard*. Kanye West’s ‘Fade’ hit like a fist—bass so thick it made the windows tremble. The whole car vibrated like it was alive. Jimmy began tapping the steering wheel like he was conducting an orchestra of violence. And then he pulled out of the driveway like he was late for a coronation. *Fast*. *Too* fast.

“Roll up, roll up—hold up, hold up,” Jimmy sang, and it wasn’t sloppy or half-remembered—he hit it *clean*.

Every word sharp, every pause exact, every little run and breath placed like muscle memory. He snapped the consonants right on the beat, rode the bass like it belonged to him. Even the ad-libs came out perfect—timed, cocky, effortless—like the song had been written for a man who thought life was a stage and the world owed him an audience. Remmick stared straight ahead for several seconds, jaw set. Then he slowly turned his head and looked at Jimmy with

a confused, speechless frown that said: *what the hell is wrong with you?* Jimmy, meanwhile, looked ecstatic—his eyes forward, his charismatic grin on, completely unbothered by the fact he was shaking the entire universe with bass. Remmick finally spoke, voice low.

"…You *always* like this?"

Jimmy glanced over for half a second and flashed that signature Sir Lord smile—bright, smug, dangerous.

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "pretty much."

Remmick's brows knit.

"Why?"

Jimmy shrugged with theatrical confidence, one hand flicking in time with the beat.

"Because I fuckin' *can*, Remmick," Jimmy said, still smiling, "because I'm not confined to a physical body anymore, because I'm not listening to sad poetry and banjo music shite in my own car."

Remmick scoffed, offended on behalf of banjos everywhere.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with a banjo," Remmick muttered.

Jimmy laughed, still driving like the road owed him money.

"Sure," Jimmy said, "and there's nothing wrong with me either."

Remmick stared at him. The bass thumped again like punctuation.

"Something's *definitely* wrong with you, I just don't know what yet," Remmick said, flat.

"Exactly," Jimmy replied, smiling wider.

Remmick leaned back, resigned, the corners of his mouth twitching despite himself.

"Jesus," Remmick muttered.

Jimmy tapped the steering wheel twice before going right back into it—flawless again, not missing a syllable—his voice full of swagger and absolute confidence. He swerved around a slow-driving car like it was personally insulting him, then sped up again, the bass roaring like a heartbeat. Remmick kept watching him anyway—quiet, wary, trying to make sense of it. In all his years—human and vampire—he'd never met anyone like Jimmy Crystal. Jimmy wasn't just loud or confident. He was *unrestrained*, like rules slid off him and shattered on the ground. It was…*different* from Remmick.

Remmick could get wild too, but his kind of unrestrained always had an edge to it—hunger, survival, the need to *win*. What Jimmy was doing right now wasn't hunger. It was pure, reckless life-force, blasted through speakers and swagger and the audacity of a man who

acted like he'd never once been told to sit down and behave. It made Remmick uncomfortable—because it was a mystery he didn't understand. But deep down…it was also weirdly intriguing. Amusing. And—against Remmick's better judgment—kind of *fun*.

***

The auto store sat a few blocks inland from the beach—bright, polished, too modern to feel real. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Rows of shelves held glossy boxes covered in words and numbers that looked like spells: watts, inches, dual, ported, sealed. Photos of smiling people holding speakers like trophies. Jimmy walked in like he owned the aisle. Remmick followed a step behind, still adjusting to the idea that the afterlife had…*retail.* Jimmy did a slow scan of the wall, eyes sharp, rings flashing whenever he lifted a hand to point.

"Right," Jimmy muttered, instantly offended. "They've rearranged the fuckin' wall since last time."

Remmick blinked.

"Last time?"

Jimmy shot him a look that said *don't start*, then kept walking. Remmick trailed after him, glancing at boxes that might as well have been written in another language. The realm tried to slip tiny bits of understanding into his mind—just enough to make him uncomfortable, like someone was whispering answers inside his mind without permission. Jimmy stopped at a display, leaned in, and clicked his tongue.

"Mm. Nah. Too small."

Remmick frowned.

"Too small?"

Jimmy gestured at the box like it had personally insulted him.

"I want the kind that makes your fuckin' *soul* vibrate. The kind that tells that *fake* ass universe that I came from down there to shut the fuck up."

Remmick frowned, slightly surprised at Jimmy's statement.

"That sounds….unhealthy."

Jimmy smiled.

"Exactly."

Jimmy reached for another box, tilted it to read the specs—then froze.

“Shite,” Jimmy said suddenly with a roll of his eyes.

Remmick glanced at him.

“What?”

Jimmy slapped the box back onto the shelf like it was guilty.

“Hold this kingdom together for two minutes. I’m about to commit a crime in their precious fuckin’ restroom.”

Remmick’s brows knit.

“A crime?”

“A leak,” Jimmy said, already walking off. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t talk to anybody. Don’t start a fuckin’ fellowship and love cult.”

Remmick frowned, offended by Jimmy’s remark.

“Uh…yeah. Okay…screwball,” Remmick replied with a roll of his eyes.

Jimmy disappeared toward the back of the store, chains shifting, tiara catching the fluorescent light like he was ridiculous on purpose. Remmick was left alone in the aisle with humming lights and shelves of alien technology. He paced once, then stopped in front of a stack of subwoofer boxes and stared at them like staring hard enough might turn them into something familiar—banjos, whiskey, wooden floors, anything that made sense to him. Instead, he got glossy packaging and numbers. He picked up one box carefully. It was heavier than it looked. The photo showed a black speaker cone like a dark eye. He turned it over and read slowly. He didn’t know what “watts” meant—except he *did*, faintly, because Pelmont kept pushing knowledge into the edges of his thoughts like an unwanted gift. Two guys came down the aisle behind him—laughing too loudly and walking like the world was theirs. They slowed when they saw Remmick standing there, out of place, staring at the box in his hand like he’d never seen a store before. One of them nudged the other with a grin.

“Yo,” the first guy said, voice friendly in a fake way, “you good?”

Remmick didn’t respond at first. He kept his gaze on the box, giving them as little attention as possible. The second guy chuckled.

“Man’s starin’ at that box like it’s gonna talk back.”

Remmick exhaled slowly and turned his head just enough to acknowledge them.

“I’m fine,” Remmick said, calmly, “keep walkin’.”

The first guy’s grin sharpened.

“Nah, I’m just askin’, ‘cause you been holdin’ that box, lookin’ around like you don’t know where you are.”

Remmick’s jaw tightened.

“I’m waitin’ on my friend,” Remmick said, his voice low and even, “if it’s all the same to you.”

The second guy stepped closer, his eyes sliding over Remmick like he was assessing him.

“Your *friend*?” the second guy repeated, amused. “You mean the dude dressed like he’s half Beastie Boy, half pageant winner?”

The first guy looked away and laughed as the second guy smiled amusingly.

Remmick’s eyes hardened, but he didn’t rise to it. He kept his tone flat.

“*Don’t*,” Remmick said.

The first guy raised his hands like he was innocent.

“Relax, man. We just don’t want people stealin’.”

Remmick stared at him for a beat.

“I’m not stealing,” Remmick replied.

The second guy laughed.

“That’s what everybody says.”

Remmick’s patience thinned. He tried one more time, quieter.

“Look, *walk* away, okay?” Remmick said.

The first guy drifted closer anyway—testing space.

“You touchin’ merchandise,” the first guy said, and the “friendly” tone was gone now. “You gonna pay for it?”

Remmick’s shoulders stayed loose as he put the box back on the shelf and kept his hands open.

“There, I put it back,” Remmick said. “Now *leave* me alone.”

The first guy scoffed and reached out, grabbing Remmick’s sleeve—casual, possessive, like he owned him for a second. That touch lit something *ancient* in Remmick. Remmick’s body went still but his voice stayed level.

“Take your hand off me, please,” Remmick said.

The first guy's grin widened.

"Or what?"

Remmick held his stare and tried—one last time—to be the man who was changing.

"Or you'll regret it," Remmick said softly, "so I'm going to tell you one final time, *take* your hand *off* me.

The first guy shoved Remmick—hard enough to make his shoulder bump the shelf. Remmick took one step back and he could've walked away. He knew that but right when he was actually going to, the second guy shoved him too, laughing right in his face like it was entertainment—like Remmick was just another thing in the aisle to play with. And that's when something in Remmick snapped. He moved—*fast*, not vampire-fast, nothing supernatural, just fast in the way violence can be. Remmick grabbed the first guy by the collar, yanked him in, and slammed him down hard enough to make the shelves rattle. The man yelped, scrambling, but Remmick hit him once—clean, brutal—more a statement than a brawl. The second guy lunged, grabbing at Remmick's shoulder, trying to pull him off. Remmick twisted and backhanded him—hard—and the second guy staggered into a display, stars in his eyes. That should've been the end. It should've been enough. But the first guy spat something cruel—something small and humiliating—while he tried to get up, and the sound of it hit Remmick like a match to dry grass.

Remmick's rage surged—hot, old, *starved*, and as it surged, the air changed, not a sound, a *pressure*. Like the realm leaned in and said: *Careful***.** Remmick felt it—cold crawling up the back of his neck, a tightening around his ribs as if the universe itself was bracing. Self-defense was one thing, but what rose in him next wasn't defense. It was *punishment*. Remmick dropped down to the first guy and started hitting him—fists like hammers, anger pouring out. The man cried out, hands up, trying to shield his face but Remmick didn't stop. The second guy stumbled forward again, trying to grab Remmick from behind but Remmick rushed to his feet, spun around and hit him once—hard and perfect—and the second guy went down hard, lights out, with his body collapsing like a switch had been turned off. People nearby gasped.

Someone shouted. A cart clattered. A voice yelled for security. Remmick didn't hear any of it. He was back on the first guy with full rage. Then Remmick surged up and drove a kick into the man's side. The guy choked and curled as Remmick lifted his foot again— The pressure in the air deepened, heavier now, darker, like a hand on his shoulder trying to pull him backward. However, Remmick ignored it as he lifted his foot again. And that's when Jimmy came out of the restroom. Jimmy rounded the corner, took one look at the aisle—blood, bodies, and people frozen—and Jimmy's face did something almost unbelievable: he smiled and then laughed. like an excited, giddy child seeing a performance at the circus. A few shoppers stared at Jimmy like *what the fuck is wrong with you?* However, Jimmy didn't care. Then Jimmy's face went flat and his eyes sharpened.

"All right," Jimmy snapped, moving fast over to Remmick now, "that's enough."

As Remmick's foot came down, Jimmy lunged and grabbed Remmick by the arms, yanking him away with surprising strength.

"All right!" Jimmy barked. "That's enough!"

Remmick fought him for half a second before surging forward with his breath ragged and his eyes filled with rage.

"Let me—"

"*No*!" Jimmy hissed, hauling him back. "Do you feel that?! That pull?! That cold?! That's Pelmont watchin' you. Keep going and it'll spit you right fuckin' out—down to the lower realms! You want that?! You want to wake up somewhere that makes where *I* was—The Bone Temple look like a fuckin' holiday?!"

Somehow, thanks to the realm once again filling Remmick's head with gnosis regarding what The Bone Temple was, what Jimmy said landed with Remmick. Remmick froze but Jimmy didn't loosen his grip until he felt Remmick come back into his body.

"Good," Jimmy muttered, "now walk."

A store employee hovered near the end of the aisle, pale, stunned. Jimmy pointed at the guy on the floor without slowing.

"Call whoever you call," Jimmy said to the employee briskly, "he'll live. Probably."

Jimmy walked with Remmick out into the sunlight. Outside, the parking lot air hit Remmick like a slap—salt and heat and open space. Remmick paced immediately, back and forth, hands flexing like they still wanted to keep fighting. His breathing came in harsh bursts. Jimmy stood by the car, watching him with an expression that was half warning, half impressed.

"Shite, I didn't know you had that in you," Jimmy said, grinning, "all that sad-poetry, banjo-shite Irishman energy—"

Remmick shot him a look, offended even through the adrenaline.

"*Don't*."

Jimmy lifted his hands.

"I'm just saying—you're not as fuckin' soft as you look."

Remmick's face tightened. His voice dropped, raw.

"I'm not proud of it," Remmick replied. "I went too far. I—I should go back in and apologize."

Remmick turned to walk back inside but Jimmy grabbed Remmick's arm while staring at Remmick as if he had just spoken nonsense.

"What? *Fuck* no!" Jimmy snapped. "You'll do no such fuckin' *thing*! I heard someone in there say that *they* put hands on *you* first," Jimmy said. "So they *deserved* it!"

Remmick's jaw clenched.

"They deserved *me*...losing myself?"

Jimmy shook his head with a baffled frown.

"You stopped."

Remmick shook his head once, furious at himself.

"I *stopped* because you *pulled* me *away*."

Jimmy's grin faded slightly—logic sliding in under swagger.

"And because you felt the realm start pulling," Jimmy said, "that's the line here. Self-defense is one thing. Cruelty is another."

Remmick swallowed hard with a brief close of his eyes.

"It felt…*good,*" Remmick admitted, his voice low with shame. "For a few seconds, it felt good pummeling that fella. That's what scares me."

Jimmy watched him, quieter now.

"This realm makes you feel it," Jimmy said. "On Earth, you could do whatever you wanted and call it survival. Here, you don't get to lie to yourself as easily."

Remmick closed his eyes for a beat, exhaling slowly—like he hated that Jimmy was right. Jimmy jerked his chin toward the car.

"Get in," Jimmy ordered. "Sit. Breathe. Don't spiral."

Remmick hesitated, then nodded.

"Okay."

"And don't leave," Jimmy added as he headed back towards the store. "Because if you do, I'm gonna have to chase you, and I'll be fuckin' pissed off about it."

Remmick let out a short, reluctant breath that was almost a laugh before getting into the front passenger seat and shutting the door. As Jimmy disappeared back inside, Remmick stared through the windshield, his chest tightening as guilt replaced adrenaline. On Earth, violence *never* came with guilt—at least not like this. Not this heavy, immediate, intimate kind that sat in the ribs and wouldn't move. Remmick looked down at his hands. They were clean, but he could still feel the moment the air changed, the realm tightening around him like a warning. Remmick leaned his head back against the seat with his jaw clenched. *If I'm feeling guilty now,* he realized, *then something in me really is changing*—and that terrified him—and, at the same time, deep down, it almost made him *hope*.

***

Jimmy came back out of the store ten minutes later like he'd just grabbed milk. Two subwoofer boxes were stacked in his arms like trophies. He was smiling—genuinely pleased with himself—like the aisle fight had been a commercial break. He popped the trunk, tossed the boxes in with a solid thud, then shut it and dusted his hands off.

"Right," Jimmy said cheerfully, "sorted."

Remmick stared at him from the passenger seat window like he was watching a man commit a crime against reality.

"You actin' like nothin' happened," Remmick said.

Jimmy opened the driver's door and slid in, still smiling.

"Because it's done."

Remmick's brows pulled together.

"I should have gone back and apologized." I really feel bad about what happened."

Jimmy turned his head slowly.

His face made an almost *eww* expression—pure offended disgust—like Remmick had just suggested licking the floor.

"…Apologized," Jimmy repeated.

Remmick didn't back down.

"Yeah. I lost *control*, Jimmy. Folks saw it. The man's entire face was bleedin'. I—"

Remmick stopped as Jimmy let out a short laugh and shook his head, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Oh, you're letting this realm change you *far* beyond how it changed me," Jimmy said with a smile, his voice dripping with disbelief. "It's like watchin' a wolf try to become a fuckin' therapist."

Remmick's jaw flexed.

"I'm *not* evil, Jimmy," he said, low. "I'm *not* a bad guy."

The words landed wrong. Jimmy's smile vanished like it had been slapped off his face.

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple" ~ 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple Soundtrack

Jimmy stared at Remmick—his eyes sharpening, his posture tightening—offended in a way that was immediate and personal.

“And what the fuck am I then?” Jimmy snapped.

Remmick blinked.

“That’s not what I meant—”

Jimmy cut him off, his voice rising, emotion starting to heat through the swagger.

“No, go on,” Jimmy said. “Say it. ‘I’m not a bad guy like Jimmy is.’ As if I was just fuckin’ *born* rotten, aye? As if I just came out of the fuckin’ womb wearin’ a tiara and chains and murderin’ people for *fun*.”

Remmick’s mouth opened, but Jimmy was already rolling.

“You can’t even *imagine*,” Jimmy went on, his Scottish edge sharpening with each word, “what it’s like to be eight years old and watch your whole *family* get ripped to shreds. My mum—*slaughtered*. Sisters—*gone* in a *blink*. And my *father*?”

Jimmy let out a harsh, bitter laugh.

“My father didn’t grab me. He didn’t fuckin’ hold me. He didn’t fuckin’ *save* me.”

Jimmy’s grip tightened on the steering wheel as his rings flashed.

“He chose God,” Jimmy said, his voice turning darker. “A God that couldn’t punch his way out of a fuckin’ paper bag.”

Remmick went still, his eyes on Jimmy now—fully, no jokes, and no banjo commentary. Jimmy swallowed hard as his eyes lightly watered, and his chest moved like it was holding back something painful.

“And then the world ended,” Jimmy continued, quieter but more dangerous. “And I spent twenty-eight years becomin’ hard inside because if I didn’t, I’d die. If I didn’t, I’d be that eight-year-old boy forever—cryin’ at a door nobody fuckin’ opens. Despite me being changed and redeemed, all that painful shite *still* haunts me *every* fuckin’ day.”

Silence filled the car for a beat. The bass from earlier felt like it had never existed. Remmick looked at Jimmy, his expression shifting—anger gone, replaced by something steadier.

“I’m sorry,” Remmick said quietly. “I genuinely didn’t mean it like that.”

Jimmy’s jaw worked once. His eyes went glossy—just a thin, betraying shine—before he looked away like he hated that anyone could see it. Remmick continued, his voice low, sincere.

“I know you went through your own kind of hell too, Jimmy,” Remmick said. “And…I don’t think you’re a bad man, Jimmy.”

Jimmy stared forward, breathing through his nose like he was trying not to let that land too hard. Then—after a beat—his voice came out rougher, quieter.

“You’re not evil either,” Jimmy said.

Remmick blinked. Jimmy glanced over at him, the edge still there, but the truth underneath it.

“You weren’t evil for defendin’ yourself back there,” Jimmy said. “You crossed the line a bit, aye. But the start of it? That was self-defense.”

Remmick’s throat bobbed. He didn’t expect Jimmy to say that. Jimmy shrugged like he hated being sincere.

“And if I’d been out there when those two pricks put hands on you?” Jimmy added, his voice casual again like he was talking about the weather. “I’d have kicked their asses for you.”

Remmick turned toward him, surprised.

“You would really do that?”

Jimmy shot him a look like Remmick had asked him to braid friendship bracelets.

“Yes,” Jimmy said flatly. Then, immediately, Jimmy added, “Don’t get all fuckin’ weird on me about it.”

Remmick half smiled.

“We might be friends,” Jimmy said, grudging and annoyed, “but I’m still not adoptin’ you.”

Remmick stared at him for a second, then frowned like he couldn’t believe his ears.

“…We’re *friends*?” Remmick asked. “*Really*? You consider me a friend?”

Jimmy’s face pinched into an even more weirded-out frown.

“Don’t start,” Jimmy warned.

Remmick’s half smile turned into a full one anyway, like something inside him loosened. Jimmy sighed like a dramatic child being forced to have feelings.

“I told you,” Jimmy said, starting to drive, “don’t get weird on me, or when we get back to my house, I’ll call Smoke over to kick your ass.”

Remmick let out a short laugh and shook his head.

“That ain’t even funny. You know, I almost kicked his ass pretty bad in the juke joint down on Earth; I could easily *fully* kick his ass up here.”

Jimmy laughed.

“First off, it *is* funny to me,” Jimmy replied with a faint frown and a half smile, “and secondly, I believe you definitely could after what I saw in that store.”

Remmick’s laugh slipped out again—quiet, real, involuntary. And after a beat, Jimmy smiled, just a little. Then he let out one short, reluctant laugh—like it escaped him before he could stop it. Remmick glanced over, amused. Jimmy shot him a warning look that couldn’t fully hide the fact he’d laughed.

“Don’t you dare,” Jimmy muttered.

Remmick’s smile widened.

“Don’t I dare what?”

Jimmy scowled, but it was flimsy.

“Don’t make me say somethin’ nice twice,” Jimmy replied.

As Jimmy started the car, Remmick let out another soft laugh and shook his head. And the car rolled forward under the bright Pelmont sun—two former villains trying to figure out what friendship looked like when it wasn’t built on blood.

Jimmy’s car slid into the drive like it owned the damn street. The bass had finally been turned down to something survivable, but the engine still sounded like it was holding a grudge. Jimmy killed it, sat there for half a second like he was letting the world catch up, then popped the door and climbed out in one smooth motion—tracksuit immaculate, tiara dead center, rings flashing like punctuation. Remmick stepped out slower, his eyes scanning the quiet neighborhood like he still didn’t trust peace to stay put.

“All right, time for house rules,” Jimmy said as he kicked his shoes off with zero grace, then turned and started counting on his ringed fingers like a man reading commandments.

“Rule one, don’*t* go raiding my fridge in the middle of the night like a starvin’ raccoon,” Jimmy said. “If you’re hungry, you eat like a human being. In daylight. With dignity.”

Remmick blinked.

“I wouldn’t—”

“Rule two,” Jimmy plowed right over him, “if I hear you clankin’ around downstairs after midnight, I’m coming down there, and I’m not gonna be fuckin’ polite about it.”

Remmick’s lips pressed together, trying not to smile.

“Rule three,” Jimmy continued, “the TV does not get blasted at two in the fuckin’ mornin’. I don’t care what you’re watchin’. I don’t care if it’s a concert, or one of them shitey cooking shows where people cry over fuckin’ bread. If it’s loud enough to make my floor vibrate, I’ll unplug your TV and kick your ass out of my house.”

“You got real specific trauma around televisions, huh?” Remmick asked after quietly laughing.

“Don’t psychoanalyze me, vampire,” Jimmy said as his eyes slid to him.

Jimmy kept going like he’d been waiting his whole life to be a landlord.

“Rule four,” Jimmy continued as his stare sharpened like a blade, “you don’t touch my hair products, not the gel, not the spray, not the little expensive oils. If I catch you upstairs in my bathroom rubbin’ argan oil on your head like it’s holy water, I’ll kick your ass out of my house faster than you can say Dracula.”

“Dracula, that’s funny,” Remmick said after laughing. “Anyway, you got— argan oil?”

“Of course I fuckin’ do,” Jimmy said while frowning, offended.

“You’re unbelievable,” Remmick replied while shaking his head once, amused.

“Aye, well,” Jimmy said dryly, “you’ll adjust.”

Jimmy angled his chin toward the hallway.

“Basement’s through there and down the stairs, blankets are in the closet down there—don’t set my house on fire. Don’t invite strangers. And if anyone knocks—”

“I don’t answer,” Remmick said.

“Good,” Jimmy said with a brief smile, his brows lifting to give a look that said: L*ook at you learning.*

Jimmy turned toward the stairs. The posture shifted on him—Sir Lord energy clicking into place like armor. He started up, one hand trailing the banister, casually. Remmick lingered at the bottom, watching him go, and the amusement in his face faded into something quieter. He looked down briefly, his jaw working.

“Jimmy,” Remmick said.

Jimmy stopped halfway up and looked back over his shoulder, tiara catching the light like it was mocking seriousness.

“What?” Jimmy responded.

Remmick swallowed. When he spoke again, his voice was lower—rougher—not weak, but carrying that old grief like weight.

“Is there…any chance,” Remmick asked, carefully, “that I could ever see my family again?”

Jimmy didn’t answer right away. He turned and fully stared at him for a long beat, his eyes unreadable, like he was deciding whether to be honest or just be annoying. Remmick’s throat bobbed.

“My parents, my sister,” Remmick added.

“Your sister’s dead, aye?” Jimmy asked after exhaling through his nose.

Remmick’s eyes watered at the bluntness, but he nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Then there’s a chance,” Jimmy said, like he was discussing the weather. “Thought-intention can pull people here if they’re already gone. Sometimes. Depends.”

Remmick’s face tightened—hope and fear fighting behind his eyes.

“And my parents?”

Jimmy’s gaze narrowed.

“Do you know if they’re dead?”

Remmick looked down, and for a second, he didn’t look like a monster or a man who’d ever been feared. He looked like someone who’d been split open by not knowing.

“No,” Remmick admitted, his voice breaking slightly. “I don’t know. I wish I did.”

Jimmy nodded with a faint frown.

“Right,” Jimmy responded. “Well, that’s the problem.”

Remmick waited, almost holding his breath for something softer that didn’t come. Jimmy shrugged from the stairs.

“I don’t know about your parents. If they’re alive somewhere—if they lived out their lives—then they’ll come when they come. If they’re dead already…we can try.”

Jimmy tilted his head, like it was a mild inconvenience.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Jimmy added, “or later this weekend. We’ll see.”

The words were technically helpful. The tone was pure Sir Lord: *don’t make this sentimental, I’ll vomit.* Remmick’s shoulders dipped anyway, disappointment slipping in.

“Okay,” Remmick said in a low tone.

The hope Remmick let himself hold started to fold back up. He turned toward the basement hallway slowly, like he was heading down into a quiet cell.

“Remmick.”

Jimmy’s voice stopped him. Remmick turned back. Jimmy hesitated—just a fraction. It was subtle, but *real*, like the old version of him wanted to scoff, and the new version couldn’t. Jimmy’s eyes stayed hard, but his voice came out lower.

“…I’m sorry,” Jimmy said, and it sounded like he hated the sentence. “About your family.”

Remmick blinked, caught off guard. Jimmy’s jaw flexed once.

“I know what it is to lose someone,” Jimmy continued. “The pain—it doesn’t stop, not really….But you’ll get through it.”

Remmick’s face shifted—surprised, touched, and trying not to show either. He gave a faint frown that was almost a smile.

“Thank you,” Remmick said quietly. “For…sayin’ that.”

Jimmy’s response was immediate defense—swagger slapped over sincerity like a bandage.

“Aye,” Jimmy said dismissively. “All right, don’t make it weird.”

Remmick faintly smiled. Then Jimmy lifted two ringed fingers in a lazy salute—half mock, half real.

“Night,” Remmick said.

Jimmy started up the stairs without looking back.

“Night,” Jimmy tossed over his shoulder, “and again, if you touch my argan oil, I’m gonna become a problem.”

Remmick huffed a breath that almost qualified as a laugh, then headed for the basement.

***

Jimmy came down the stairs at eight on the dot like it was a sacred appointment, dressed in his deep-purple tracksuit like it was formalwear, tiara balanced dead-center, rings flashing every time he flexed his fingers. His platinum hair was styled so clean it looked like he’d bullied it into obedience. He hit the bottom step—already halfway in the mindset of *cereal + Teletummies*—and stopped. Remmick was already up, in Jimmy’s kitchen, sitting in a chair at Jimmy’s island, drinking coffee like a man with rights. Jimmy stared at him for a long, offended beat, as if Remmick had committed an act of vandalism. Remmick glanced up from the mug, his eyes slightly tired and his posture loose but not careless. He offered a polite half-smile—softened by a headache and the strange new weight of being human again.

“Mornin’,” Remmick said, his voice warm with that Irish lilt tangled in Southern drawl. “Hope it’s alright that I fixed myself a cup. I woke up with a…damn *massive* headache.”

Jimmy’s expression stayed sour.

“A headache.”

“Yeah,” Remmick said, rubbing a thumb along the rim of the mug like he didn’t trust the feeling. “New for me. When I was what I was, I didn’t get sick, but this mornin’ I woke up feelin’ like somebody put a hammer behind my eyes.”

Jimmy stared at him like he was evaluating the legitimacy of headaches as a concept, then clicked his tongue.

“Fine,” Jimmy said, like granting permission cost him money. “You can have your wee human suffering beverage—*this* time.”

“Gee, thanks, Jimmy,” Remmick said sarcastically with a faint smile and a slight shake of his head.

Jimmy’s eyes dropped to Remmick’s clothes and his brows lifted. Remmick had traded yesterday’s borrowed grief for something that actually looked like him—a faded deep-blue hoodie under an open denim overshirt, dark jeans, and brown leather boots. It was simple, clean, and rugged in that effortless way that made it look like he’d been wearing it his whole life instead of willing it into existence five minutes ago.

“Where did you get the new clothes?” Jimmy asked.

Remmick glanced down at his clothes briefly and then shrugged.

“There were some magazines in the closet downstairs,” Remmick said with a shrug. “I saw a fella in one of them dressed like this, thought about how it’d look on me, and then—before I knew it—it was.”

Jimmy raised both brows while slowly nodding.

“You used thought-intention.”

Remmick frowned, confused for a few seconds before the gnosis of what thought-intention was entered his mind. Then, Remmick slightly shrugged and slightly shook his head.

“Yeah, I guess I did,” Remmick responded.

“Well…okay,” Jimmy jerked his chin toward the front door, “bring your coffee.”

“Bring my coffee where?” Remmick asked with a simple blink.

“Next door,” Jimmy said, already moving, “to my sister Sasha. I’m eating cereal at her house because her cereal is better and her telly doesn’t judge me.”

Remmick's shoulders dropped slightly out of fatigue, not fear.

"Jimmy… I really don't feel like being around folks this mornin'. You mind if I just stay here?"

Jimmy stopped mid-step and turned slowly, eyes narrowing like Remmick had asked to borrow his lungs.

"*No*," Jimmy said.

"No as in—" Remmick replied with a frown.

"No, as in I don't *let* people *sit* in my house *alone*," Jimmy snapped. "Unless it's Sasha, Kellie or Ian."

Remmick's eyebrows lifted despite himself.

"Kellie…?" Remmick paused, then half smiled. "Hold up. You got a *woman*?"

Jimmy's face pinched into instant disgust.

"A *woman*," Jimmy repeated, like the word tasted bad.

Remmick leaned back in his chair, amused now.

"I'm just sayin'—some lady *actually* looked at you and went, 'Yeah. I'll take *that* home'?"

Jimmy's stare could've frozen seawater.

"No offense," Remmick said before lifting his mug slightly like it was a peace offering.

"Oh no," Jimmy said, voice syrupy with threat. "*Plenty* offense."

"All right then," Remmick said after chuckling under his breath.

Jimmy stepped closer, rings glinting. His tone went cold—clean, controlled, final.

"You've got two options," Jimmy said. "Option one: you come next door and you sit there like a normal bastard. Option two: you pack up your emotional Irishman act, get the *fuck* out of my house and find somewhere else to stay."

Remmick's jaw flexed. He stared at Jimmy like he wanted to argue—and like part of him knew Jimmy meant it.

"*Fine*," Remmick said, pushing up from the chair hard enough to make it scrape.

Remmick snatched up his mug and walked toward the door with tight, irritated strides. Jimmy followed, satisfied. Remmick shot him a look over his shoulder.

"You know, I think I hate you a little," Remmick said in an icy tone.

“Yeah, get in line,” Jimmy said with a half smile.

***

Sasha’s kitchen smelled like coffee, sunlight, and celebrity. Sasha sat at the table with Ian—calm, warm, all steady eyes—and beside them, unmistakably, was Jack O’Connell: casual posture, mug in hand, looking entirely too comfortable like he hadn’t just wandered into a universe where fiction walked around alive. Jimmy stepped in and immediately hit Jack with that Sir Lord Jimmy stare—disdainful, unblinking, like Jack had tracked mud onto sacred ground. Remmick frowned too at first, more puzzled than hostile.

Something about Jack felt familiar in a way that made the back of his mind itch, like a name caught on the tip of his tongue. Then Remmick’s eyes slid past him—and landed on Sasha. He went still for half a second, not in shock, not in confusion, just that quiet, involuntary pause a man has when he sees a beautiful woman and his whole body notices before his mouth does. Remmick’s brows lifted slightly. His gaze stayed there a beat too long. Then, without taking his eyes off her, Remmick asked Jimmy in a low voice:

“...That’s *your* sister?”

Jimmy answered automatically.

“Aye.”

Then Jimmy looked over at Remmick, and caught the look on his face. Jimmy’s mouth pinched into a faint, offended frown.

“Look at you,” Jimmy muttered, “pick your tongue up off the fuckin’ floor.”

Remmick blinked once, then slowly turned his head toward him with a half smile that was all wounded innocence.

“I didn’t say anythin’.”

“You didn’t have to,” Jimmy replied flatly. “Your whole face started writing poetry.”

Sasha’s eyes flicked between them, already suspicious and amused at the same time. Before she could say anything, Jack looked up—and saw Remmick. Jack’s mug paused halfway to his mouth. His eyes widened. His mouth opened like his brain couldn’t find the next step.

“What the—” Jack stood so fast his chair scraped. “What the *hell*?!”

Sasha’s smile widened like she’d been waiting for this exact moment. Jack took two steps toward Remmick, staring like Remmick was an apparition with paperwork.

“You’re— you’re *real*,” Jack blurted.

Remmick stared back, flat and unimpressed.

“Course I’m real.”

Jack pointed at him like that would make it make sense.

“No, I mean—I *played* you.”

Remmick’s brow furrowed.

“You *played* me? In what? Cards?”

“In a film,” Jack said, still incredulous. “*Sinners*.”

Remmick went still for a beat—then that slow, dangerous charm slid into place. His signature smile appeared, small at first, like a blade being unsheathed.

“…Did you now?” Remmick said. “Well, that’s something, and how’d you do?”

Jack let out a laugh that sounded half-delirious.

“I—I tried my best and I think I did pretty damn good.”

“Well, all right,” Remmick said, his smile widening just a fraction.

Their little orbit of disbelief was cut off instantly by Jimmy’s voice—sharp, annoyed, and very much *not impressed*.

“Sasha,” Jimmy said, eyes still on Jack like a stain. “Why is the British superstar in your kitchen at eight in the morning? Did he get lost lookin’ for attention?”

With a faint, amused half smile, Jack’s face flashed with *“God, you’re a prick”* so clearly it didn’t need words.

Sasha sipped her coffee like she was enjoying the show.

“Jack’s here because I’m getting into filmmaking up here.”

“Of course you are,” Jimmy displayed a disdainful frown.

“And I’m considering casting him,” Sasha continued, excited.

Jimmy rolled his eyes so hard it looked painful.

“Aye. Brilliant,” Jimmy responded. “Nothing says ‘new beginnings’ like hiring the man who wore my face while I was being traumatically murdered.”

Jack sighed with a brief close of his eyes and a shake of his head.

“Jimmy, for fuck’s sake, stop the theatrics,” Jack said before displaying a faint half smile.

“*Anyway*,” Jimmy continued after rolling his eyes at Jack, “I’m getting cereal. I’m watching Teletummies. With the exception of Sasha, no one disturb me unless it’s an emergency or you’ve got Frosted Flakes.”

“Teletummies? What’s that?” Remmick raised his brows with a half surprised smile.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jack leaned over and said in a low voice to Remmick.

“Jimmy—wait,” Sasha said, “Jack and I were talking.”

Jimmy paused like someone had yanked a leash. Sasha kept going, bright and earnest.

“We think it would be neat if you—along with Ian, Samson, Kellie, Spike—watched *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple.* None of you has seen it.”

Jimmy stared at her like she’d suggested self-harm as a group activity.

“Why the fuck would I watch that shite?” Jimmy said, his voice flat with disgust. “I lived it already.”

Remmick, however, tilted his head—curious.

“I’d like to see it,” Remmick said, “might help put the puzzle pieces in place.”

Jimmy turned his head slowly toward him, offended on principle.

“I fuckin’ *hate* puzzles,” Jimmy said, like it was a moral stance.

“Yeah, I bet you hate a lot of things,” Jack grinned.

“Seems like it,” Remmick responded before letting out a small laugh—genuine.

“Fuck off, UK Hollywood, no one was talking to you,” Jimmy snapped at Jack.

Jack laughed and shook his head, clearly not taking Jimmy seriously at all.

“Jimmy, be nice,” Sasha warned with slightly, briefly widened eyes.

“Yeah, or Sasha will take your tiara away,” Jack teased with an amused smile before he and Remmick laughed lightly.

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed at Jack.

“Say another sentence, Jack, and I’ll find a way to make your fuckin’ afterlife unpleasant.”

As Jack looked away and laughed again, amused at Jimmy’s threats, Sasha grabbed Jimmy’s arm before he could escalate, laughing lightly.

“Jimmy. Reconsider. Please.”

“No,” Jimmy said immediately. “Absolutely not.”

Sasha leaned in, her voice sing-song and strategic.

“If you agree…I’ll take you to Teletubby Land again.”

Jimmy’s whole face changed, not fully, but the hard edge facial display cracked, and underneath it was the eight-year-old lightning bolt of excitement.

“...*Really*?” Jimmy asked quietly with a full smile, like he didn’t trust hope not to bite him.

Jack turned his head away and laughed silently into his coffee like he’d just witnessed the most ridiculous hostage negotiation in history.

Remmick stared at Jimmy with a baffled half-smile and faint frown, like he was watching a storm cloud turn into a birthday balloon.

“…What the hell is—Teletubby Land?” Remmick asked.

“I’ll tell you about that later too,” Jack said as he leaned toward Remmick and lowered his voice.

Sasha clapped once, delighted.

“And since Remmick’s here—after *28 Years Later*, we can watch *Sinners*.”

Remmick’s smile returned—full charisma now, intrigued.

“That would be interesting,” Remmick responded, “especially if he’s sayin’ he played me.”

Remmick nodded toward Jack.

“I’d like to see if you did me justice.”

“That I did, at least *I* think so anyway,” Jack replied with a faint smile before taking a sip of his coffee.

Sasha bounced slightly on the balls of her feet—adult excitement with kid energy.

“This is going to be so fun. I’m calling everyone. They should be over in about an hour.”

Jimmy, still softened and then muttered like he was making a deal with the devil all over again.

“Fine,” Jimmy said, “but if that film makes me feel feelings, I’m not allowing you to watch Teletummies with me for an entire month.”

Sasha laughed.

***

The upstairs theater room in Sasha's house looked like it had been designed for comfort by someone who'd never once been forced to sit in a wooden chair and pretend they were fine. A huge screen took up the far wall. The lights were dimmed low. The wraparound sofa curved in a generous semi-circle, piled with thick pillows and blankets that looked like they'd been stolen from heaven's linen closet. The carpet was plush enough that even the floor felt like a couch. Everyone was there.

Ian and Samson were on the carpet in front. Spike sat cross-legged beside them. Sasha claimed the center of the sofa like a hostess and a director, remote in hand, proud and nervous in equal measure. Jimmy sat to her left—pressed close enough to count as "near," not close enough to count as "comfort." Kellie sat on his other side, legs tucked under her, expression already braced like she knew exactly what kind of night this could become. Jimmy had a bowl of popcorn in his lap the size of a small planet and a two-liter bottle of soda he drank straight from like manners were a concept that happened to other people. Remmick and Jack were at the far end of the sofa—close enough to see the screen clearly, far enough away to watch Jimmy's reactions without having to turn their heads much. Remmick lounged back into the pillows, looking almost too normal for a man who'd once worn hunger like a crown. Jack looked less relaxed than he was pretending to be. Sasha clicked the remote, her smile bright.

"Okay," she whispered, thrilled. "We're starting with the first one."

The room settled. The screen flared. The opening of 28 Years Later started with the most pivotal scene for Jimmy —showing on screen, eight-year-old Jimmy Crystal, small and terrified, watching his mother and sisters become a part of the infected in an instant, watching the world rot right in front of him, watching his father stand there like judgment and then leaving him like a sentence. In the theater room, adult Jimmy's body changed before anyone else did. His leg started bouncing, subtle at first, then faster. He brought a ringed hand up to his mouth and pressed his knuckles against his lips like he was holding something in. He stared so hard at the screen that it looked like he was trying to fight it with his eyes. There was moisture in his eyes—not enough for anyone to call it tears, but enough to make the shine sit there, betraying him under the screen-light. Sasha glanced sideways, careful but Jimmy didn't look at her. Ian stared at Jimmy too—quiet, measuring. Jack watched Jimmy for a few minutes without meaning to. Even Remmick's gaze slid over, just once, like he recognized the shape of a man trying not to crack. Sasha leaned slightly toward Jimmy, voice soft.

"Jimmy…you al—"

"I'm fine," Jimmy cut in immediately.

His head shook once, quickly. His voice came rough and rushed, like he needed the words out before they turned into something else.

“I’m fine,” Jimmy repeated, “watch the fuckin’ film.”

Sasha swallowed the rest of her sentence and nodded, letting it go. And a few minutes later—like the moment had never happened—Jimmy’s posture loosened again. His knee slowed. He yawned once, openly, like he was bored on purpose. He drank from the two-liter like he owned carbonation. Halfway through the film, he was back to rolling his eyes at dramatic pauses and muttering, *“Get on with it,”* like trauma could be out-talked. By the time the ending rolled in—the moment onscreen where Jimmy introduced himself to Spike—in the theater room, Jimmy smiled—a real smile, quick and bright. Then he let out a soft laugh for reasons nobody else in the room could possibly know, like that moment hit a private part of him that still believed in introductions and beginnings.

Spike didn’t react. He stared forward with his jaw set. Sasha didn’t pause the film. She’d edited it so the first movie bled seamlessly into *The Bone Temple*—no harsh cut, no black screen—just one story sliding into the next like a bruise deepening. The room stayed quiet as the second film began, and this time, Jimmy didn’t sit like a fan. He sat like a man watching himself from the outside for the first time. The moment onscreen Jimmy started making the Jimmies fight—barking orders, turning people into entertainment—Jimmy’s posture changed. His ringed fingers came up to his mouth with his knuckle pressed against his lips like he was holding something back. His eyes stayed locked on the screen, unblinking. Then he rolled his eyes, not the bored kind, the disgusted kind, like he was offended that *that* was him. Jimmy shook his head once, slow, like the sight of himself was embarrassing in a way violence never used to be. Jack noticed immediately. So did Sasha. Ian’s gaze flicked over. Kellie’s eyes narrowed, sharp and watchful. Even Remmick’s attention snagged—because Jimmy wasn’t smirking. Jimmy wasn’t proud. He looked…irritated at himself. Onscreen Jimmy pushed harder—louder, crueler. In the theater room, Jimmy’s jaw tightened and he muttered under his breath, “Aye, look at this fuckin’ shite.”

“Jimmy, you okay?” Sasha asked as she leaned in, quietly.

Jimmy didn’t look at her. He kept staring at the screen like the screen had personally wronged him. His mouth twitched like a joke wanted to happen, but it died before it could be born. Then he exhaled hard, and when he spoke his voice was low—still sharp, still Jimmy—but not joking.

“Seein’ that,” Jimmy muttered, “makes me feel fuckin’ sick.”

The room went still. Jimmy blinked once, like he was surprised by his own sentence.

“…Which is annoyin’,” Jimmy added, his voice tight, “because that used to feel like… power.”

His throat bobbed. He swallowed like the words tasted wrong.

“Turns out it was just…me bein’ a monster in designer tracksuits,” Jimmy said, bitter and flat. “It’s amazing how this realm makes you feel different about things.”

Jack’s face shifted—caught, uncomfortable—like the line landed in his chest. Then—Cathy’s table. The Teletubbies story. Jimmy’s face loosened for half a second, a faint half-

smile like his inner child pushed up through the rubble. When onscreen Jimmy said, *"Roberto Calamari,"* theater-room Jimmy burst into laughter—full, open, delighted laughter, like a kid watching a stupid cartoon. Kellie shot him a look sharp enough to cut glass. Jack faintly frowned, then half-smiled and shook his head with a short, breathy laugh. Sasha tried not to laugh but failed and covered her mouth. Jimmy didn't care. He laughed hard enough he had to wipe at his eyes with the back of his hand, still giggling like the joke belonged to him. And then the film turned: the torture. The killing. The onscreen Jimmy doing the worst parts like it was nothing. The theater room changed temperature without the air shifting. Jimmy's laughter died instantly—like someone slammed a door in his chest.

He sat up straighter. Too straight. The popcorn bowl slid off his lap and landed against the cushion beside him. His hands came together in front of him—fingers laced tight, rings pressing into skin like he was trying to anchor himself. He stared at the screen, face hard and flat—except his eyes. His eyes flickered, not with pride, not with humor but with something close to shame. He rolled his eyes again, slower this time, and shook his head like he couldn't stand the sound of his own voice coming out of that onscreen version of him.

"Holy Shite," Jimmy whispered, rough.

Sasha's voice came again, careful.

"Jimmy—what's wrong?"

Jimmy finally turned his head just enough to answer—still not looking anyone fully in the face, like eye contact would crack him open.

"What's wrong?" Jimmy repeated softly, like the question was stupid.

Jimmy nodded at the screen once, jaw clenched.

"That," Jimmy said. "That's what's wrong."

After a beat, in that low voice that still carried across the room—because even remorse didn't make him quiet—Jimmy added:

"I did that shite like it was…normal."

Jimmy swallowed hard, nostrils flaring once, and his voice tightened.

"And now I'm watchin' it and it's—" Jimmy shook his head again, disgusted, "—it's revolting."

His eyes went glassy, just a faint sheen. He blinked it back like he was furious at his own body.

"I was a fuckin' monster," Jimmy said, quiet but clear.

Then he snapped his gaze forward again, like he refused to let anyone comfort him for it.

“And if anybody in this room says ‘it’s okay,’” Jimmy muttered, his voice going low and lethal, “I’ll fuckin’ lose it. *Don’t*. Do *not* try and comfort me about that.”

Nobody laughed, nobody moved. Jack just stared at him, face tight, like for the first time he wasn’t thinking about “Jimmy Crystal the character”—he was thinking about the boy inside the man, watching his own sins like a documentary he couldn’t turn off. And Jimmy sat there rigid, eyes locked on the screen, breathing heavier than he wanted anyone to notice—forcing himself to watch.

And then the film reached the crucifix, the upside-down hanging. The onscreen Jimmy, crying out—raw and frantic—asking Ian why he couldn’t hear *his* voice anymore. That was where theater-room Jimmy lost the fight. His knee started bouncing again, fast enough that the popcorn bowl trembled slightly in his lap. His breathing grew heavier. He went still from the shoulders up, but his hands—his hands shook a little around the bottle, like he didn’t trust them not to spill what he was holding in. Jimmy’s eyes clouded, then tears gathered. He blinked hard, once. The tears didn’t leave. They stayed and thickened until they finally spilled. Jack sat up straighter, his expression shifting—empathy landing before he could stop it.

Sasha’s face tightened with guilt—her mouth parting like she wanted to turn it off, rewind, apologize to him for showing him his own hell. Remmick watched too, quieter now. Not amused. Not distant. Just…*seeing.* Spike stared at Jimmy, frozen like he didn’t know what to do with the fact that Jimmy could break. When the onscreen Jimmy cried for his father, the theater-room Jimmy’s face crumpled in a way that looked almost humiliating, like it wasn’t his decision, like his body betrayed him the way it had betrayed him when he was eight. When the onscreen Jimmy choked out, *“Father…why hast thou forsaken me?”* Jimmy, in the theater room, jolted up so fast his popcorn bowl tipped. A few kernels spilled onto the carpet. He didn’t even look at them. He didn’t look at anyone. He just stormed out. The door thudded behind him. Silence swallowed the room. Even the film on the screen felt distant for a moment—still playing, still cruel, still loud, but somehow not as loud as the quiet left behind. Jack’s throat worked. He looked down, his jaw tight, like something in him had just changed. Sasha stood quickly, guilt and worry written all over her.

“I’m gonna go—” she started.

“No,” Jack said, standing.

His voice wasn’t loud, but it cut clean through the room. Sasha blinked at him. Jack’s expression was serious—unusually grounded.

“Let me,” Jack said. “I…I should.”

Sasha hesitated. Then she nodded slowly.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Jack turned and walked out, leaving the rest of them sitting in the dim light of the theater room with a movie still playing and a real man breaking somewhere outside it.

<u>Scene Song: "Stand By Me" ~ Ben E. King</u>

Jimmy was on the front porch, pacing, not the usual Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal prowl either—not the strutting, peacocking swagger he used when he wanted a room to orbit him. This was ragged. Mechanical. Back and forth across the porch boards like he was trying to grind the feeling out through the soles of his shoes. Tears ran down his face unchecked. No performance. No flourish. No witty little curtain to hide behind, just heavy, real tears falling faster than he could master them. His shoulders were wound tight as cable, his hands flexing open and shut at his sides like he wanted to hit something, break something, tear the whole night in half just to stop what was happening inside him.

Jack stepped out onto the porch and let the door ease shut behind him. Jimmy didn't look over. He kept pacing. Jack watched him for a second, then moved a step forward and planted himself directly in Jimmy's path. Jimmy stopped short, not gracefully. Not with any theatrical stop-on-a-dime bullshit. He just halted, like he'd run face-first into something solid. His head bowed. He stared at the porch boards as a tear dropped from his chin onto the wood, then another.

"Jimmy," Jack said in a low and serious voice.

Jimmy said nothing. Jack swallowed once.

"Tell me what's going through your head right now," Jack asked.

Jimmy let out a laugh that wasn't a laugh at all—just air breaking ugly in his throat.

"What's going through my head?" Jimmy repeated hoarsely. "Oh, I don't know, Jack. Pick one. The nails? The screaming? The fact that I watched myself behave like a diseased fuckin' demon in a damn *movie*?"

Jimmy's voice cracked on the last word. He looked away sharply, his jaw jumping. Then, quieter—*worse* because it was quieter—Jimmy said:

"I know I deserved it."

Jack didn't interrupt. Jimmy's chest hitched as he stared out into the Pelmont dark, his eyes glassed over.

"I know I deserved death after what I did," Jimmy said through sobs, "to Cathy, to Tom, to their friends, their family, after what I did to everyone."

Jimmy gave a tiny, bitter shake of his head.

"I know that," Jimmy continued through sobs. "I'm not standing out here looking for some fuckin' saintly little absolution package with a bow on it."

Jimmy's mouth twisted. He bit down hard on his lower lip and for a second it looked like he might steady himself. Instead, his face crumpled. Light sobs broke out of him, humiliating and helpless. He turned half away, one hand braced on the porch post, shoulders shaking while he fought to get the air back in. He kept biting his lip like pain there might stop the pain everywhere else. It didn't. Jack's expression tightened with sympathy, but he stayed quiet. Jimmy shook his head again, his eyes tightly shut. When he finally forced the words out, they came broken.

"But it still—" Jimmy said, his breath snagged as he briefly pressed the heel of his hand against his eyes and tried again, "it still fuckin' *hurts*."

Jimmy dragged in a shaky breath that did nothing for him.

"It still hurts to see myself dying on that cross," Jimmy continued, his voice collapsing into rawness, "upside down like some fuckin' grotesque joke, crying for a father—"

Jimmy stopped, his sobs caught halfway in his chest.

"—for a father I never had."

Jimmy paused again, another failed attempt to hold himself together.

"A father who never came," Jimmy said in almost a whisper through sobs, "not when I was eight, not when I was rotting alive, or when I was dying. *Never*."

Jack's throat worked. Jimmy laughed again, but this time it was wet with tears and full of self-disgust.

"Shite, listen to me. Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, reduced to this tragic little fuckin' opera on the porch."

Jimmy wiped viciously at his face, but fresh tears replaced the old ones instantly. Then he said, in a stripped-down voice that had none of the swagger left in it:

"I don't deserve to be here."

Jack's brow pulled together. Jimmy looked at him then—really looked at him—with red-rimmed eyes and an emotional frown that made him seem suddenly younger and older at once.

"I don't deserve Pelmont," Jimmy said, "not after what I did. And that death—that death *proves* it. That was the ending I *earned*. That was the universe getting it fuckin' right for once. I died like something damned because I *was* something damned."

Jimmy's gaze dropped.

"I don't deserve a second chance," Jimmy said tearfully, almost in a whisper.

With that, whatever strength had kept him upright gave out. Jimmy walked the few steps to the porch swing and dropped onto it hard with his elbows on his knees and his head in his

hands. His shoulders rose and fell with uneven breaths. He didn't sob loudly now. It was worse than that—it was quiet, exhausted grief leaking out of him like he didn't have enough energy left to make a spectacle of pain. Jack stood there watching him, frowning with something that looked a lot like regret. Then he crossed the porch and sat beside him on the swing. For a few seconds, he said nothing. The swing creaked once under the added weight, then settled. Jack leaned forward, clasping his hands, staring out into the night as if trying to line the words up before he used them. When Jack finally spoke, his tone was careful, serious.

"I'm gonna say something," Jack said, "and I need you to hear all of it before you decide to tell me to go fuck myself."

Jimmy didn't lift his head, didn't answer and Jack took that as permission.

"It's a good thing," Jack said slowly, "that you died at the Bone Temple on that cross."

Jimmy's head snapped up. The reaction was instant and vicious—shock and anger flaring together so sharply it almost burned the tears right off his face.

"*What*?"

Jack lifted both hands a little, defensive but steady.

"Wait. Just wait a minute."

Jimmy stared at him like he'd just been slapped.

"You come out here, find me half out of my fuckin' mind, and *that's* your opening line?"

"I said *wait*," Jack said firmly. "What I *mean* is if you had never died there, you never would've gotten this chance."

Jimmy froze. Jack kept going before he could be cut off.

"You never would've met Sasha. You never would've gotten out of that body, out of that sickness, and out of that place you were trapped in. And no, I don't just mean physically."

Jack turned toward him fully.

"I mean *all* of it. Your mind, your soul, *everything*."

Jimmy's breathing stayed uneven, but he didn't speak. Jack studied him.

"You wanna know the truth?" Jack asked. "Before tonight, I didn't think you were really changed and redeemed."

Jimmy's face shifted—anger flickering with hurt.

"I didn't," Jack said. "I thought you were just faking the shit, honestly."

Jimmy looked away, his jaw tightening like he'd expected as much.

"But then I *watched* you watch it," Jack said.

Jimmy's eyes returned to him.

"I watched your face during the torture scene with George, Jane Ji, Matthew and Tom," Jack continued. "I watched you when the first scene of the film came on where you made the Jimmies fight each other. You weren't proud. You weren't entertained. You weren't making excuses. You looked sickened by it. You looked disgusted. You looked like you wanted to crawl out of your own skin."

Jimmy swallowed hard.

"And when that cross scene hit and you saw yourself in it," Jack said quietly, "you didn't cry because you were embarrassed. You cried because you *felt* it. Because you saw what that life was. What it did to you. What you became in it."

Jack let that sit for a beat.

"That's *change*, Jimmy."

Jack's voice gentled.

"A psychopath doesn't sit there horrified by his own cruelty," Jack continued. "An insane man who's still in love with the darkness doesn't break apart because he finally understands the damage."

Jimmy's lower lip trembled once as he pressed his teeth into it again.

"You were living in rot," Jack said, "in infection, in violence, in a body and mind that got twisted young and that *kept* getting twisted. You were eight years old when that virus tore your life to pieces. *Eight*."

Jack's eyes hardened with feeling.

"I'm not excusing what you did. I'm saying I don't think you were *ever* gonna get well staying alive in that shithole of a world."

Jimmy stared at him, stunned silent.

"I think it *had* to end," Jack said. "I think you *had* to come out of that sick body and that sick mind before you could become...*this*."

Jack gestured toward him—not at the tears, but at the man inside them.

"Before you could heal in mind, body, and soul."

Jimmy's eyes were flooding again now, tears collecting so thickly they made the porch lights blur in them. Jack's own voice softened further.

“So yeah. I’m glad you died there.”

Jimmy flinched a little at the bluntness, but he listened.

“I’m glad because otherwise I never would’ve known this version of you,” Jack said, “the one who can feel horror at what he did, the one who can grieve it, the one who actually gives a damn.”

Jack paused.

“The *better* version of Jimmy, the one that was probably buried under all that damage long before anyone ever had a chance to save him.”

That hit Jimmy hard. Jimmy looked at him slowly, like the motion itself hurt. He didn’t have a comeback; he didn’t have a curse. He didn’t have one of his sharp, glittering little insults to hide behind. Jimmy just sat there staring at Jack with tearful, shocked eyes, his face pulled into that wounded, emotional frown, tears spilling freely now while more gathered faster, clouding his vision. It was all there in that look—disbelief, grief, shame, and something even more fragile than all of them: the stunned ache of being seen kindly when you were certain you deserved nothing kind at all.

Jack held his gaze for a second, then he moved and put an arm around Jimmy and pulled him in. It was warm, steady, a *real* hug. Consoling. *Honest*. That was what broke the last of Jimmy’s control. A fresh sob tore out of Jimmy—small, wrecked, and helpless—and he folded into Jack hard, clutching him back like he hated needing it but needed it anyway. Jimmy’s face pressed into Jack’s shoulder as Jack held on. Jimmy’s sobs came a little harder now, not loud, but deeper—dragged up from somewhere old and poisoned and wounded. Jack said nothing; he didn’t need to. Under the night air of Pelmont, Jimmy cried against Jack like a man mourning every version of himself at once— the *victim*, the *monster*, and the *child* and broken soul on the cross—and Jack just kept holding him through it.

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Scene Song: “Everything In Its Right Place” ~ Radiohead

In the end, Sasha and Jack decided to save *Sinners* for the following evening. After everything that had happened with *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple*—the tension, the horror, Jimmy breaking down the way he had—nobody had it in them to sit right back down and start another film. The night had gone too emotionally sideways, too raw, too heavy. So the movie was postponed, the lights were turned on, and little by little the evening dissolved. Not one cutting remark, not one dramatic complaint about the night air, the gravel, the moon, the existence of feelings, or the general incompetence of the universe for allowing him to have a nervous breakdown in a tiara, nothing. Jimmy just walked.

Fast at first, then slower, like the weight of what he'd felt back on Sasha's porch had settled into his limbs and made each step more deliberate. The usual swagger was gone. No peacocking. No Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal strut. Just a man moving beside another man with his jaw set tight and his eyes fixed ahead, as if speaking even once might crack something open again that he had only barely managed to force shut. Remmick walked next to him in silence; he didn't push. He didn't ask if Jimmy was all right, because that question was useless when the answer was written all over somebody's face. Remmick didn't throw out some soft consolation either, because pain like that didn't always want company in words. Sometimes it just wanted somebody there who understood what it was to keep walking while your insides still felt like broken glass. By the time they reached Jimmy's front door, the night had gone still around them. Jimmy quickly unlocked it and entered. Remmick followed, shutting the door behind them with a soft click.

The house was dark and quiet, holding that deep nighttime hush that made every movement sound louder than it was supposed to. Jimmy didn't even glance back at him. He didn't throw out one of his usual house decrees about fridge law, unauthorized breathing, or the criminal offense of existing too loudly after midnight. Jimmy just bolted, straight for the stairs, fast enough to almost look panicked. Jimmy hit the first step and then the next and then the next, taking them hard and quick like getting upstairs was the only thing in the world that mattered. Like if he didn't get behind a closed door immediately, he might come apart for real. Remmick stayed where he was. He watched Jimmy disappear up the staircase without calling after him. A few seconds later, a door upstairs shut, not slammed, just shut with a firm finality that said enough. Remmick stood in the dark entryway for a moment longer, his face quiet and tired, eyes fixed on the staircase. And there it was—that look on him, not pity. Jimmy would've hated pity, not amusement either, because there was nothing funny about the way Jimmy had gone upstairs like a wounded animal looking for somewhere private to bleed.

It was *sympathy*, plain and visible, the kind that only came from somebody who knew what pain did after the noise of it was over. Somebody who knew the aftermath could be worse sometimes—when the crying stopped, when the people were gone, when the body was left alone with whatever the mind had dragged back up from the grave. Remmick's jaw shifted once. Remmick looked down for a second, then back up at the now-empty stairs.

"Yeah," Remmick muttered under his breath, rough and low, like he was answering a hurt Jimmy hadn't spoken aloud, "I know."

Then he exhaled through his nose and turned toward the basement door. He went down the stairs without saying another word, leaving the house in silence with one man upstairs with his ghosts, and another downstairs with his own.

Chapter 9

Scene Song: "Burning Pipers Hut" ~ Beltaine

The next morning, Jimmy Crystal did something unusual—he stayed asleep, no early migration next door to Sasha's house to sprawl out and watch *Teletubbies* like some glitter-crowned child, auditing children's television for moral decline, no dramatic entrance downstairs to declare new laws about noise, breakfast etiquette, or the criminal offense of breathing too close to his kitchen island, nothing. Upstairs, Jimmy was still asleep and Remmick knew it. Remmick couldn't have explained exactly how, not in any ordinary way. But the gnosis that moved through Pelmont had begun settling into him more and more since his arrival—quiet, strange, and certain. It wasn't words. It was just knowing. Jimmy was still asleep, still not ready to face the morning. Remmick stood alone in the kitchen for a moment, thinking about the night before: Jimmy crying on the porch. Jimmy walking home in silence. Jimmy rushing upstairs like being seen for one second longer might kill him. A small frown pulled at Remmick's mouth. Then he decided he was going to do something nice for him, not because Jimmy had asked. Jimmy damn sure hadn't, not because Jimmy would know what to do with kindness if it walked up and bit him on the nose, but because Remmick knew pain when he saw it; And because somewhere deep in him there was that instinctive Irish warmth that answered hurt with food. The old reflex of hospitality.

Feed somebody. Put a hot plate in front of them. Let the meal say what words sometimes couldn't. It was just in him. So he got to work. Using the thought-intention ability Sasha had explained to him the day before, Remmick began manifesting what he needed piece by piece across the counters and island. Proper ingredients. Proper food. Not some half-assed improvised breakfast—rashers, sausages, black pudding, eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes, potatoes, thick slices of bread, butter, tea things, oil, salt, pepper—everything appearing in steady succession until the kitchen looked ready for a serious morning. Remmick gave the spread a small approving nod.

"All right," Remmick said in a low tone, "let's do this right."

And he did, for the better part of an hour and a half, the kitchen belonged to him. He moved between the island and the stove with increasing rhythm, sleeves pushed up, working with the focus of a man who took cooking seriously. He chopped and sliced and turned and plated. The potatoes crisped. The sausages browned. Rashers curled and hissed in the pan. Black pudding fried up rich and savory. Eggs were cooked carefully. Mushrooms softened in butter. Tomatoes blistered at the edges. Bread toasted golden. The smell slowly took over the whole downstairs, warm. Hearty. *Real*. By the time Remmick set the first full plate on the island, the house smelled like comfort itself. Upstairs, Jimmy stirred. He turned over in bed, still half asleep, one arm dragging across the sheets. Then he went still. His brow furrowed. A few seconds later, he sat up. Something smelled...*suspicious*, not bad, just suspicious. Jimmy sniffed again, platinum hair fallen halfway into his eyes, face creasing into immediate

confusion. Then into offense. Then into the special kind of alarm only Jimmy Crystal could feel at the scent of breakfast happening without his prior authorization.

“What the fuck,” Jimmy muttered.

Jimmy threw the covers back, yanked on a T-shirt over his black track-pants pajama bottoms, and got out of bed fast. Not leisurely. Not casually. Fast, like a man who had just woken up to evidence of possible kitchen trespass. He opened the bedroom door and sniffed again, *the smell of food*, a lot of it. Jimmy frowned harder and started downstairs at a near-rush, barefoot, suspicious, and already emotionally preparing for war. He hit the bottom of the staircase, rounded into the kitchen—and stopped dead. Remmick was in motion at the stove, spatula in hand, moving like a cook in the middle of breakfast service. He crossed from burner to island and back again with smooth efficiency, focused and steady. On the island already sat one finished plate, loaded and steaming. Jimmy stared at it, then at Remmick. Then his whole face drew itself up into pure Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal outrage.

“What,” Jimmy said flatly, “the *fuck* are you doing?”

Remmick paused mid-step, turned his head, and gave him that easy, mannerly half-smile of his.

“First of all,” Remmick said, “good mornin’.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes so hard it was a miracle they came back.

“Yeah, fuckin’ whatever,” Jimmy snapped. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Remmick turned the heat down under one pan, flipped a sausage, and faced him more fully.

“Makin’ you breakfast.”

Jimmy blinked once like he’d heard a foreign language and resented it.

“I can see that,” Jimmy responded. “My question is *why*?”

Remmick set the spatula down for a second.

“Because after the night you had yesterday, I figured I’d do somethin’ decent for you.”

Jimmy’s face didn’t soften in the slightest. Remmick kept going.

“You sat through that film and you had to watch and experience all that again. Then you came back here lookin’ like you were still wearin’ half of it.”

Remmick’s voice dropped a little, not pitying, just matter-of-fact.

“I know what that kind of pain feels like after the fact.”

Jimmy’s jaw twitched. Remmick gave a slight shrug.

“So I wanted to do somethin’ to lift the spirits of my friend.”

There was the word: *friend*. Jimmy’s eyes flicked once, but he said nothing. Remmick nodded toward the food.

“*And*,” Remmick added, “it’s my way of sayin’ thank you.”

Jimmy frowned.

“For what?”

“For bein’ there for me,” Remmick said simply. “When I was hurtin’ like that myself.”

That made Jimmy go very still. Before Jimmy could say anything sharp, Remmick lifted both hands a little in defense, a faint playful glint tugging at one side of his mouth.

“And before you start in,” Remmick said, “none of this came out of your fridge.”

Jimmy narrowed his eyes.

“I used the thought-intention thing Sasha told me about, manifested every bit of it myself. I didn’t touch a single thing you keep inventory on in here.”

That should have helped but it didn't. Remmick dropped his hands again and finished plainly,

“I just wanted you to know somebody gave a damn about what last night did to you, Jimmy. And today, that somebody was me.”

And there it was: kindness, direct and unguarded, exactly the kind Jimmy never knew how to hold. Because outside of Sasha, nobody had really done things like this for him in so long that it didn’t even land as comfort at first. It landed as *pressure*, e*xposure*. Something too warm, too close, too *unfamiliar*. Something that made the old broken places in him want to lash out before they could be touched. So Jimmy did what he always did when something hit too close, he attacked it.

“Get out,” Jimmy said in an icy tone.

Remmick frowned.

“What?”

Jimmy’s voice got sharper.

“You heard me. Get the *fuck* out.”

The kitchen went still. Remmick straightened slowly.

“Jimmy—”

"*No*." Jimmy pointed toward the door, his expression hardening into signature Sir Lord offense. "No, absolutely fuckin' *not*! I didn't ask for this! I didn't ask you to come in here and start playing breakfast fairy in my kitchen because I had one bad fuckin' night!"

"That *isn't* what this is," Remmick responded.

"The hell it *isn't*!" Jimmy shot back. "What is this supposed to be, huh?! You think I need feeding like some child?! You think I need to be handled with fuckin' eggs and sausages because I got upset?!"

Remmick's own expression was starting to sharpen now. Jimmy took a step closer, anger climbing to cover everything else.

"I don't even really *know* you," Jimmy snapped, "not enough for *this* shite! The *only* people who get to do things like this for me are Sasha or Kellie!"

That did it. Remmick's face changed, not wounded, not crushed, just pissed. Remmick gave one short incredulous laugh through his nose as he shook his head.

"Jesus Christ."

Jimmy glared at him.

"I was just bein' *nice*," Remmick said, his voice hardening, "that's all."

"Well, fuckin' *stop*!" Jimmy said coldly, "because I don't fuckin' *want* it!"

Remmick stared at him for a beat, then nodded once.

"All right, I'm sorry."

Jimmy folded his arms, chin tipped up in pure defensive arrogance. Remmick's temper finally snapped into place.

"I just thought," Remmick said, now openly irritated, "I thought we were friends."

Jimmy could have stopped there, he could have backed off. He could have said nothing. Instead he went for the cruelest thing he could find, because kindness still felt more dangerous to him than conflict ever did.

"Then you thought *wrong*," Jimmy responded in a cold tone.

A hard silence dropped between them. Remmick just looked at him. Then he grabbed the spatula off the counter and flung it across the island. It clattered hard enough to almost make Jimmy jolt.

"*Fine*," Remmick said, "to hell with you, Jimmy."

Remmick rolled his eyes and stormed out of the kitchen and Jimmy's eyes widened in genuine surprise for half a second, then his temper surged right back up to meet it.

“The *fuck* did you just say to me?!” Jimmy shouted, following him.

Remmick didn’t even slow.

“You heard me!” Remmick shouted back.

“Excuse the *fuck* out of you?!” Jimmy shouted furiously.

Remmick reached the front door, then stopped and turned around, and the look on his face had lost all its charm, no softness, no gentleness, no easy smile, just anger, and utter fed-up disgust.

“You know, you might not be the twisted lunatic you were in that movie anymore,” Remmick said, his voice low and sharp, “but shit, Jimmy, you are still one *ungrateful* asshole when somebody tries to do somethin’ decent for you.”

Jimmy glared at him, breathing hard.

“The next time I think about doing something decent for your miserable ass,” Remmick added, “I’ll think twice and remember that you aren’t worth the damn *time*.”

Then Remmick stepped outside and slammed the door behind him so hard it cracked through the whole house. Silence rushed in after it. Jimmy stood there in the entryway, his platinum hair hanging into his eyes, fury still on his face by reflex. Back in the kitchen, the breakfast sat on the island, hot, perfect, and untouched. And for one brief second before pride climbed back over his features, Jimmy looked exactly like a man who knew he had just taken something kind and shattered it with both hands.

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Scene Song: “Swallowtail Jig” ~ Hillary Klug

Remmick didn’t go far. He crossed the yard with the heat of the argument still on him, jaw tight, eyes dark, shoulders carrying that stiff kind of hurt that came after anger when it had nowhere useful to go. Sasha’s place sat next door in that same warm Pelmont stillness—sunlight on the windows, porch quiet, the kind of house that looked like it understood how to hold people without crowding them. Remmick stopped at the door, exhaled once through his nose, then knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened. Sasha stood there in soft house clothes, her hair pulled back, one hand still resting on the knob. The second she saw his face, her expression changed, not alarm, but understanding.

“Remmick,” she said gently. “You look angry, what happened?”

He tried to shrug it off. It didn’t take.

“*Jimmy* happened,” Remmick said flatly.

That told her enough already. Sasha stepped back and opened the door wider.

“Come on in.”

Remmick hesitated only a second before stepping inside. The house smelled faintly like coffee and clean linen and something sweet left over from breakfast. Sasha shut the door behind him and turned, studying him with the kind of gaze that didn’t pry so much as wait for the truth to get tired of hiding. Remmick gave a humorless little laugh and rubbed one hand over the back of his neck.

“I made him breakfast,” he said.

Sasha blinked once.

“*You*...made *Jimmy* breakfast?”

“A proper one,” Remmick said, the irritation rising again now that he had words for it. “A full one. Rashers, sausages, black pudding, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, potatoes, toast—the whole thing. I thought after last night, after that film, after him breakin’ down the way he did...”

He shook his head once.

“I thought I’d do somethin’ kind.”

Sasha’s face softened.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, well,” Remmick said, his voice roughening, “apparently kindness is a punishable offense in his house.”

Sasha leaned one hip against the wall, arms folding loosely.

“What did he say?”

Remmick let out a breath through his nose that almost could have been a laugh if he wasn’t so annoyed.

“He told me to get the fuck out,” Remmick said, “he acted like I’d come in there and insulted him by frying an egg. Then, when I told him I thought we were friends, he looked me dead in the face and said I thought wrong.”

That landed. Sasha winced—not theatrically, not for effect. A real little flicker of pain crossed her face.

“Damn,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” Remmick said, “that’s about the size of it.”

For a second, neither of them spoke. The quiet sat between them long enough to mean something. Then Sasha sighed and shook her head once.

“That was wrong,” she said plainly. “I know why he did it, but it was still wrong.”

Remmick’s eyes flicked to hers. He didn’t seem like he’d expected that answer. Sasha kept going, calm and honest.

“Jimmy doesn’t know how to let people take care of him unless it’s on terms he’s already built a whole emotional structure around,” she said. “If kindness gets too close and he didn’t ask for it, sometimes it doesn’t hit him like comfort. It hits him like pressure and so it’s instinctive for him to just—immediately attack it.”

Remmick’s jaw shifted. He looked away for a second.

“That makes sense,” he admitted, “it doesn’t make it less shitty.”

“No,” Sasha said. “It doesn’t.”

Remmick gave a small nod at that—appreciative, if still hurt. Sasha straightened a little.

“I can go next door and talk to him.”

Remmick’s head came up instantly.

“No.”

“Remmick—”

“*No*,” he repeated, firmer now, “*don’t*.”

Sasha studied him.

“If he comes to make it right, it has to be because he *means* it,” Remmick said, “not because his sister went over there and told him to go apologize like a scolded schoolboy.”

Something in Sasha’s expression shifted then—small, quiet, impressed.

“That’s fair,” she said.

Remmick looked down, then out toward the front window, where the sunlight fell in a clean square on the floor.

“I’ll be fine,” he added after a beat, though it sounded like a man trying to make fine happen by saying it first. “I just needed to get out of there before I said somethin’ I couldn’t take back.”

Sasha nodded once.

“Thank you for not doing that.”

He huffed a faint little laugh.

“I was tempted.”

“I bet,” Sasha replied with a faint smile.

That got the smallest real smile out of him. The room eased a little after that. Sasha folded her arms again, but more loosely this time.

“I’m not goin’ back to his basement tonight,” Remmick said, “not after what he did, maybe not tomorrow either, if I’m bein’ honest.”

“Fair enough. Where are you going to go then?”

He nodded toward the window with a tired little half-smile.

“I suppose I could—walk around the beach dramatically and haunt the coastline until morale improves.”

Sasha laughed.

“Or,” she said, “you could manifest your own house.”

Remmick went still. He blinked at her once.

“*...Really*?”

“Yeah,” Sasha said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “People do it here all the time. Thought-intention. You think it up clearly enough—outside, inside, all of it—and the realm manifests it into existence.”

Remmick stared at her for another second, then a surprised smile broke across his face—small at first, then fuller.

“You’re tellin’ me,” he said, “I can just...manifest a house?”

Sasha smiled.

“Yeah, and in fact, there’s a big empty stretch about fifteen houses down from mine. Go there, stand in the space, and think it up—the outside, the inside, the rooms, the layout, whatever you want. Just be clear about it.”

Remmick let out a soft laugh—this one touched with genuine amazement.

“That’s...” he shook his head once, “that’s unbelievable.”

“Yeah, a lot of this place is.”

Remmick was still smiling now, the surprise not gone from it. He looked younger at that moment, somehow, lighter.

“Well,” he said, “then I know what I’m doing, *immediately* after I leave your house.”

Sasha lightly laughed and nodded.

“Good,” she responded.

There was a pause after that. Not awkward. Just full enough that it noticed itself. Remmick looked at her properly then, not in passing, not as Jimmy’s sister, or the woman who’d just given him useful information, or the person who understood Jimmy best, but as *her*. His eyes moved over her face once, slowly, and something in his expression warmed.

“I’ll say this,” he said, his voice lower now, easier. “For all the shit that Jimmy talks, I didn’t expect him to have a sister this pretty.”

Sasha’s face changed instantly—just a little. Her mouth tried not to smile. Failed.

“Pretty?” she repeated, like she needed a second to decide whether to be amused or bashful.

Remmick’s smile tipped into that signature charming one—easy and just dangerous enough to feel deliberate.

“Yeah,” he said, “*very*.”

Sasha looked down for half a beat, then back up, and when she did, her smile had gone softer.

“Well,” she said, trying for casual and not entirely making it, “thank you.”

Remmick nodded once, still looking at her in that warm, steady way. Then he glanced toward the door.

“Once I get the place standing proper,” he said, “maybe later in the week...you’d like to come over for coffee…or dinner.”

Sasha’s brows lifted.

“That sounds suspiciously like you’re asking me on a date.”

Remmick’s mouth curved again into a charismatic smile, slow and knowing.

“Maybe.”

She laughed—quiet, coy, trying not to look too pleased and not quite pulling it off.

“Okay,” she said. “I’d like that, yeah.”

“Good,” Remmick said.

He held her eyes one second longer, then gave her a small, charming wink that somehow managed not to feel cheap on him at all. Sasha laughed again, softer this time.

“All right,” she said, “go build your house, then, Rem’.”

Remmick’s eyes briefly widened, and he gaped with a single nod and a smile of surprise.

“Rem,’ is that your nickname for me?”

Sasha laughed.

“Yeah, I think it’s cute, like you.”

Remmick smiled at her, amused, then looked away and let out a soft laugh before glancing back at her through that easy, dangerous little smile of his.

“Well now,” he said, “that’s a dangerous little nickname. I might start likin’ the way it sounds comin’ from you.”

She laughed as he stepped backward toward the door. He reached for the knob, then paused.

“And Sasha?”

“Yeah?”

His expression gentled, just a little.

“Thank you.”

The gratitude landed clean as she smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

Then he stepped out into the sunlight, leaving Sasha standing in the quiet of her front hall with a smile still warming her face long after the door had shut.

About an hour later, Jimmy finally got sick of standing in his own kitchen like a furious ghost. The breakfast Remmick had made still haunted the island, or rather, the evidence of it did, because after Remmick had stormed out and the front door had slammed hard enough to shake Jimmy’s last nerve, Jimmy had stood there in a haze of anger and pride and insult for all of thirty seconds before the smell of the food got to him again. Then the silence got to him. Then the guilt got to him. So he had done the only thing available to a man in emotional freefall with the self-awareness of a wounded peacock.

He ate it, *all* of it. Jimmy stood at the island in a black Adidas tracksuit with gray stripes and a pair of Jordans, stabbing potatoes like they had personally betrayed him, eating sausage and eggs and pudding with the grim, furious intensity of a man being proven wrong by breakfast.

It had been *phenomenal*, which somehow made the whole thing worse. Now, an hour later, Jimmy stood at one of his front windows staring out at the bright beach morning, jaw set, his fingers tapping against his arm.

"Unbelievable," he muttered to himself, "absolutely unbelievable. I am being emotionally extorted by an Irish breakfast."

The gnosis that moved through Pelmont tugged faintly at him then—that strange current of knowing that didn't always come with words. Jimmy went still. Remmick wasn't at Sasha's. He was a few houses down, just past Samson's place, at a house that had not existed yesterday and very much existed now. Jimmy blinked. Then he frowned.

"Of course he's manifested a fuckin' house," Jimmy said in a low voice.

Five minutes later, Jimmy was walking down the sandy roadside with all the determination of a man on a mission he deeply resented having. The ocean rolled nearby under the bright noon light, all blue shimmer and salt wind. The beach houses stood spaced along the shore in their lifted, elegant rows, each one touched by that clean Pelmont brightness that made everything look slightly more alive than it had any right to. A few doors down from Samson's, Jimmy found it. Remmick's house stood raised on stilts above a long drive, pale-sided and broad, with a wraparound deck lined in white railings and rocking chairs. It looked out over the beach like it had been there for years instead of hours. Solid. Airy. Comfortable. Not flashy, not ridiculous, not gilded within an inch of its life the way Jimmy would've done it. *Very* Remmick. Jimmy stood at the bottom of the steps, looked up at it, and lightly scoffed.

"Oh, sure," Jimmy muttered. "Very modest. Very plain and boring. *Revolting*."

Jimmy climbed the outdoor stairs to the deck. There was a front door but Jimmy ignored it immediately. Instead, he spotted an open kitchen window off to the side where the sea breeze moved the curtain just enough to feel like an invitation. Or at least like something Jimmy could aggressively misinterpret as one. Jimmy glanced at the door once, offended by its very existence. Then he climbed through the window. Inside, the house was bright and open, all pale walls and soft beach light.

The kitchen opened into a wide living space with vaulted ceilings, high windows, gray leather couches, wicker chairs, and the kind of clean, breezy calm that made Jimmy feel like he was inside a brochure for emotionally adjusted people. Jimmy hated how nice it was but deep down, he also respected it. The black refrigerator stood gleaming against the kitchen wall, granite counters wrapped around a broad island, and beyond that the living room stretched out in comfortable layers toward the back windows. Jimmy went to the fridge and grabbed the jug of orange juice, and naturally, he helped himself. By the time Remmick came downstairs from the upper floor a minute later, Jimmy was seated at the island on one of the stools, sipping orange juice like he owned at least twenty-five percent of the property. Remmick stopped dead on the stairs, and for a second, he just stared.

"What in the hell—"

Jimmy looked up over the rim of the glass.

“Oh, good. There you are.”

Remmick came down the rest of the steps slowly, suspicion and irritation moving across his face.

“Jimmy?”

Jimmy gave him a small nod.

“In the flesh. More or less.”

Remmick’s eyes narrowed.

“How the hell did you get in here?”

Jimmy took another sip.

“Window.”

Remmick blinked once.

“You used the *window*?”

“Aye.”

“You *climbed* through my damn *window*?” Remmick asked, his voice half angry and half surprised.

Jimmy lowered the glass, already bored with the line of questioning.

“It was open.”

“That doesn’t mean you climb through it like a damn *burglar*, Jimmy,” Remmick snapped.

Jimmy looked faintly offended.

“Please. Burglars have intent. I had *flair*.”

Remmick stared at him in disbelief. Jimmy set the glass down with a small click.

“You know, the door,” Remmick said, his voice flattening, “is how people *usually* get into a house.”

Jimmy gave a dismissive wave with a faint frown and a half smile.

“Aye, regular people. However, *I’m* not fuckin’ regular people.”

“No,” Remmick muttered darkly, “that much is painfully clear.”

Jimmy glanced around again, taking in the kitchen, the high ceiling, the open airy living room beyond it.

“So,” Jimmy said, as though he hadn’t just broken into the place, “how did you get *this*?”

Remmick followed his gaze and then looked back at him.

“Sasha told me thought-intention could do more than make food and odds and ends,” he said. His tone cooled noticeably. “Said you could manifest homes too, cars. Whatever you needed.”

Jimmy arched a brow.

“And so you manifested a beach house.”

“Yeah.” Remmick’s voice went colder still. “Now I don’t have to stay in the basement of some crazy-ass man-child who wears a tiara and watches damn kid shows like he’s seven or eight years old.”

Jimmy went still. Then, to Remmick’s surprise, Jimmy looked away and let out a light laugh. It wasn’t mocking. It was an impressed laugh.

“That,” Jimmy said with a half smile while glancing back at him, “is fair.”

Remmick said nothing. Jimmy nodded once.

“Savage. Rude. Spiritually wounding,” Jimmy added, before giving another little nod, “but fair.”

The ice in the room shifted slightly. Jimmy picked the glass up again, then set it back down without drinking from it. His fingers tapped once against the side. For the first time since Remmick had walked in, there was something less performative in his face. Less shield. Less sparkle.

“I came to apologize,” Jimmy said.

Remmick’s expression didn’t soften, but it did change. Caution replaced some of the heat. Jimmy made a face like the sentence itself tasted bad.

“Shite, even hearing it out loud is humiliating,” Jimmy said in a low tone.

“You should survive,” Remmick responded with slight attitude in his voice.

“I’m not sure I will,” Jimmy said with a slight shake of his head and a brief half smile.

Remmick leaned one hip against the counter, arms folding over his chest.

“Go on, then,” Remmick said.

Jimmy inhaled through his nose and looked down at the granite for a second.

“I was an asshole,” Jimmy said.

“That’s an understatement,” Remmick said with a slight roll of his eyes.

“No, let me finish,” Jimmy said, holding up a hand. “I was a *spectacular* asshole, a grand, glittering, deeply unnecessary asshole.”

That almost got a real smile out of Remmick, but not quite. Jimmy’s own mouth pulled tight.

“You were trying to do something nice for me. And I...”

Jimmy stopped and exhaled once through his nose.

“I behaved like kindness had broken into my home with a knife,” Jimmy continued.

“I’m not used to it,” Jimmy said, his voice lowered—not fragile, not soft exactly, but less armed.

Remmick’s brow moved slightly. Jimmy gave a short, bitter laugh.

“That sounded pathetic,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile. “I hate that. Let me try again.”

Jimmy looked up at him.

“I’m really not used to it, Remmick. Not from people. Not like that.”

The room stayed quiet. Jimmy’s jaw flexed once.

“Outside of Sasha, specifically...nobody’s done things like that for me since I was eight.”

Jimmy’s eyes flickered, then back.

“And when people get too close to the old damage, I tend to...”

Jimmy stopped and gestured vaguely.

“Well,” Jimmy continued, “you saw the show.”

“Yeah,” Remmick said dryly. “I caught it.”

Jimmy huffed out a breath.

“When somebody’s nice to me, my first instinct is to tear the niceness to pieces before it gets the chance to touch anything.”

That landed. Remmick’s face shifted a little then—not enough to let Jimmy off the hook, but enough to show he understood the shape of what Jimmy was saying. Jimmy went on, more quietly now.

“It’s not because I thought what you did was stupid,” Jimmy said, “or embarrassing. Or because I didn’t appreciate it.”

Remmick lifted an eyebrow.

“You got a strange way of showin’ appreciation.”

“Yeah, well,” Jimmy said with a grimace, “my coping mechanisms are diseased.”

That finally pulled the ghost of a smile from Remmick. Jimmy saw it and pressed on before his nerve gave out.

“I *did* appreciate it,” Jimmy said. “I just didn’t know what the hell to do with it. And then I got *angry* because I didn’t know what to do with it, which is, admittedly, insane.”

“A little,” Remmick replied with a brow raised and a half smile.

“A lot,” Jimmy said with a slight shake of his head, a faint frown and a half smile.

Remmick uncrossed his arms.

“You also said we weren’t friends.”

Jimmy looked at him fully then.

“I know.”

“You meant that?” Remmick asked.

Jimmy answered faster than he expected.

“No.”

That came out clean. Immediate. Jimmy sat up a little straighter, hands flattening briefly against the counter before one of them reached for the orange juice again just to have something to do.

“No,” Jimmy said again, quieter. “I didn’t mean it. I said it because I wanted to shove you back, because what you did was getting too close to something in me I don’t like people seeing. But I didn’t mean it.”

Jimmy swallowed once.

“I do think of you as my friend,” Jimmy continued.

That hung there between them. Then Jimmy added, because apparently he had decided to make this as excruciating as possible for himself:

“A very aggravating one, with an annoying hero complex and altogether too much breakfast initiative, but a friend.”

Remmick stared at him for a second.

“Did you eat it?” Remmick asked.

“What?” Jimmy asked, blinking once.

“The breakfast,” Remmick responded.

Jimmy looked down, then to the side, then back up with the tiniest shadow of embarrassment tugging at his face as he half smiled.

“Yeah.”

Remmick let out a short breath through his nose that was almost a laugh. Jimmy drew himself up with wounded dignity.

“And I’m not proud of the speed with which it disappeared either,” Jimmy joked with a faint smile.

That got an actual smile from Remmick, and then a genuine laugh. Jimmy pointed at him once.

“It was infuriatingly good too,” Jimmy said. “I ate it in a state of profound shame.”

Remmick laughed lightly and then his shoulders eased a little.

“Well,” Remmick said, “good.”

Jimmy stared with raised brows.

“That’s all I get? *Good?* I just confessed to a private spiral involving fried tomatoes and emotional collapse.”

“You’ll live,” Remmick said with an amused half smile.

“Fuck, you’re impossible,” Jimmy said before sighing and briefly and lightly laughing.

“Says the man drinkin’ my orange juice after climbin’ through my window,” Remmick said with a brow raised and a smile.

“*That*,” Jimmy said with a lift of the glass, “was a separate diplomatic mission.”

Remmick shook his head, but the anger in him had mostly burned down now. He came farther into the kitchen and stopped at the opposite side of the island. For a moment, the two of them just stood there in the bright, sea-lit quiet, the worst of the tension gone.

“Back home,” Remmick said, “if somebody’s hurtin’, you feed ’em. That’s just how I am. Hell, that’s how most of us are.”

Jimmy nodded once, then lightly scoffed.

“And I’m guessin’ all that’s a part of that fellowship-and-love shite you tried to put on Smoke and Stack and all those poor bastards at Club Juke?”

Remmick laughed.

“Somethin’ like that, yeah,” Remmick said with a faint smile, “that, and feedin’ people whether they asked for it or not.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Jimmy said, slipping into a wildly disrespectful mock Irish accent. “Over there in Dublin, land of fellowship, rainbows, and magical pots of gold.”

Remmick burst into laughter and shook his head.

“Wow, that was funny,” Remmick admitted, “well done.”

“Thanks,” Jimmy said with a half-smile. “I’ll be at one of these deeply underfunded Pelmont comedy clubs all week.”

Remmick laughed again. Then Jimmy’s expression turned serious.

“Where I come from,” Jimmy said, slowly, “when somebody sees you hurting, they usually either use it against you or circle it like sharks.”

Remmick shook his head.

“Not me.”

“No,” Jimmy said, and there was *real* feeling under it. “No. I’m beginning to see that.”

Then Remmick rubbed the back of his neck and glanced away for a second like he was deciding whether to say what came next.

“I never had a brother,” Remmick said.

Jimmy’s brows lifted slightly.

“I never did,” Remmick added, “but...”

Remmick stopped and shrugged once, a little awkwardly.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Remmick continued, “I was thinking this morning that maybe you could be somethin’ like that, a younger brother.”

Jimmy stared at him as Remmick kept going with a faint smile.

“A crazy one obviously,” Remmick said, “one that just speaks whatever comes to his mind first and asks questions second. One who climbs through windows, starts fights before noon, and probably gets on everybody’s damn nerves for sport.”

Jimmy let out a light laugh.

“But still,” Remmick said, “somethin’ like a brother.”

Jimmy leaned back slowly on the stool, looking at him with open surprise and a weird little smile like the idea had caught him off guard in some painfully specific place. Then Sir Lord Jimmy came roaring back just enough to protect his pride.

“No, no, no,” Jimmy said with a half smile, “you don’t want me as a younger brother.”

Remmick folded his arms loosely with raised brows and a half smile.

“No?”

“No.” Jimmy shook his head solemnly. “It would be catastrophic. There would be decrees. Fridge law would become federal. I’d insult your curtains, reorganize your wardrobe by color and emotional weakness, seize control of the television, and establish a strict anti-beige policy by force.”

Remmick laughed. Jimmy kept going, warming to the bit.

“I’d also demand ceremonial respect before coffee and would absolutely become violent over anyone playing fuckin’ sad banjo music in my house.”

Remmick laughed lightly.

“That sounds like hell,” Remmick said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“It would be extremely efficient,” Jimmy corrected with a smile.

Remmick nodded with a brief half smile. Jimmy’s smile held for a moment longer, then it eased. Jimmy looked down at the orange juice in his hand, turning the glass once against the countertop.

“Still...” Jimmy said.

Remmick quieted. Jimmy shrugged once, smaller now.

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

Remmick watched him.

“What wouldn’t?”

Jimmy glanced up at him, then away again, like he hated having to say it plainly.

“Having a brother who actually gives a damn.”

The room went still. Jimmy swallowed once.

“I’ve got a caring sister, protective as hell too. So...”

Jimmy gave the slightest shrug.

“I don’t know,” Jimmy continued, “having a brother like that wouldn’t be so bad either.”

Remmick’s expression softened a little.

“Well,” Remmick said after a second, “then quit makin’ it so damn hard for people to care about you.”

Jimmy looked at him, then nodded once.

“I’m trying,” Jimmy said.

And this time there was no joke in Jimmy’s statement, just the *truth*. Remmick studied him for a second, then pointed to the fridge.

“There’s more orange juice on the second shelf in the back of the fridge, if you want more.”

Jimmy glanced down at his glass with a brief, faint frown.

“Was that your way of accepting my apology?”

“No,” Remmick said with a faint smile. “This is.”

Remmick stepped around the island and before Jimmy could brace for it, pulled him into a quick, solid hug, not long. Not dramatic, just firm and real. Jimmy froze for half a second, clearly caught off guard before lightly hugging Remmick back.

“I accept your apology,” Remmick said as he pulled away from the hug.

Jimmy stared at him, then frowned like the hug had personally inconvenienced his image.

“All right,” Jimmy said, “that was deeply uncomfortable and—weirdly nice.”

“You’ll survive,” Remmick said before laughing.

Then Remmick moved past him toward the counter.

“But for the record,” Remmick added, “brother or not, you ever climb through my window again, I’m throwin’ your ass right back out of it.”

Jimmy turned and gave him an offended look.

“That’s a hell of a way to talk to your younger brother,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Remmick laughed.

“Threat noted though,” Jimmy said as he lifted his glass in a small salute.

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Scene Song: “Let’s Get Down” ~ Tony! Toni! Tone!

Friday morning in Pelmont came in bright and shameless. The sky was a hard, endless blue without a single cloud in it. The sun was already high and hot in a way that made everything gleam, and by noon, the air would settle into a perfect eighty degrees. It was the kind of day that seemed designed for people to be outside laughing too loud, eating too much, dancing where they stood, and pretending they weren't going back for a third plate.

Inside Sasha's house, the energy had already started. Sasha came dashing down the stairs in a pretty floral mini dress, black hair flowing down her back and over her shoulders as she hurriedly fixed one of her earrings with one hand and grabbed her purse with the other. She hit the bottom step, cut into the kitchen at speed—and stopped. Jimmy was at the counter with a cereal bowl, not eating cereal yet but preparing to, which, in Sasha's opinion, was almost worse. He actually looked good too, annoyingly so. The shopping trip with Sasha, Kellie, and Remmick had done him a world of favors. He had on the gray outfit they'd picked out for him—a short-sleeved, lightweight hooded top and matching gray pants that gave him a clean, relaxed look without stripping away any of the absurd Sir Lord Jimmy energy, even his platinum hair was perfectly styled. He stood there with the cereal box tucked under one arm like he was about to commit a crime in broad daylight. Sasha rolled her eyes upward and shook her head as she crossed the kitchen in a hurry. Before Jimmy could pour a single piece of cereal into the bowl, Sasha snatched it right out of his hand. Jimmy froze. Then he slowly turned his head toward her with the exact expression of a man who had just been spiritually betrayed in his own kingdom.

"What," he asked, his voice edged with offended disbelief, "the fuck gives?"

Sasha put the bowl out of reach and kept moving like she didn't have time for his nonsense because, in fact, she did not.

"You don't need cereal, Jimmy," she said. "We're on our way to a barbecue that's gonna have more than enough food."

Jimmy stared at her for two long seconds. Then he gave a brief, disbelieving laugh before shaking his head.

"Sasha," he said, with all the gravity of a man delivering sacred truth, "my appetite is *never* off. It doesn't sleep. It doesn't retire. I could *eat* this cereal, five slices of pizza, a big fuckin' bucket of chicken, *and* still have room for my two-liter soda like the champion I am."

Sasha laughed despite herself as she opened the cabinet and put the bowl away.

"Well, you can play *How Much Can Jimmy Eat in a Day* some other time," she said. "Right now we have to go. And by the way, you look great—and you smell *great* too, what is that cologne you're wearing?"
"That would be Dior Sauvage Elixir," Jimmy said with a smile and a brow raised.

Sasha's eyes widened a little and her brows lifted with a smile.

"Ooh, fancy," she said.

“*Royally* fancy,” he replied, still smiling, resulting in her laughing.

“Well, come on, Sir Lord,” Sasha said, “we still gotta pick up Ian, Samson, Kellie, and Remmick, and we need to get to the park before noon because noon is when the reunion starts.”

“Well, wait—can’t we leave after the Teletummies? I haven’t even watched this morning’s episode yet,” Jimmy asked.

“No, or we’ll be late, now come on,” Sasha said as she grabbed him by the arm and started steering him out of the kitchen.

Jimmy sighed hard and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling as he let himself be dragged along.

“I’m only allowing this abduction,” he announced with a half smile, “because you’re my sister. Otherwise, there’d be *serious* consequences, like a punch to the fuckin’ face.”

Sasha laughed again and kept pulling him toward the front door.

“Boy, hush,” Sasha said with a half smile and a slight shake of her head, while Jimmy laughed lightly with her.

A little while later, Sasha pulled up to Ian’s house. Ian came out first, looking sharp in a red polo shirt, white pants, and red-and-white sneakers, clean and casual in a way that somehow still looked put together. Samson came out right behind him in black jeans, white sneakers, and a black sweater with white stripes across the chest, wearing it like the day itself had personally invited him to have a good time. Kellie followed last in her white dress, bright and pretty and effortless. Once they all got in—Ian, Samson, and Kellie in the back while Sasha drove and Jimmy occupied the front passenger seat—Kellie leaned forward immediately from behind Jimmy, wrapped her arms around him from the seat, and kissed him briefly on the lips. Jimmy briefly and faintly frowned and blinked at the ambush affection. Kellie pulled back, smiling.

“Well, look at you,” Kellie said, “you actually look like a good-looking adult for a change.”

Sasha burst out laughing, and so did Ian. Samson let out a brief, light laugh and then leaned back in his seat like that line deserved its own applause. Jimmy sat there for half a second with his tongue in his cheek and a half smile. He then slowly turned his head just enough to look at Kellie out of the corner of his eye.

“That’s rich,” Jimmy said, still half smiling. “You were with me *before* the upgrade, so let’s not sit here pretending you discovered standards overnight.”

Jimmy and Sasha laughed as Kellie playfully hit his arm with a faint smile before lightly laughing and shaking her head.

“Well, this’ll be my second barbecue after today,” Ian said with a smile while settling back. “I’m hopin’ this one’s just as good as the first.”

“Oh, it will be,” Sasha said confidently as she drove. “Because this time my mom made the banana pudding, not my aunt.”

“*Good*,” Samson said immediately, loudly enough that everybody looked at him.

Then Samson nodded with complete conviction.

“Because the banana pudding at the last barbecue tasted like paint and feet.”

Everyone in the car laughed. Including Sasha, who let out a loud, disbelieving laugh.

“Paint and feet?” Sasha said with a brow raised, a faint frown and a smile.

“That is the most disrespectful and accurate description of that pudding I have ever heard in my life,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile as he turned in his seat to face Samson, scandalized and delighted at once.

“I know but come on,” Samson said after laughing, “*tell* me I’m wrong.”

“I won’t,” Jimmy said with an amused smile, “because you’re not. That shite tasted like somebody seasoned vanilla with betrayal.”

That caused them all to laugh again.

By the time Sasha pulled up outside Remmick’s new house a few doors down from Samson’s, the whole car was still carrying the loose, easy energy of a group already halfway into a good day, but when they stopped, Remmick didn’t come out. Sasha frowned.

“What’s his damage?” Jimmy asked before looking towards the house and then at Sasha.

“I don’t know,” Sasha said, “he should be ready by now.”

She took off her seatbelt and Jimmy did the same.

“You three stay here,” Sasha said to Ian, Samson and Kellie before she and Jimmy got out and headed up toward Remmick’s house.

The place still looked strange in the best way—new only by time, but already lived-in by presence. The sea breeze moved lightly against the porch. The beach glimmered not far beyond it. Sasha walked through the door like a normal person. Jimmy followed through the door as well, though with visible reluctance, as if using it might damage his mystique. They found Remmick upstairs in one of the front rooms, standing near the window in a white roll-up sleeve shirt and clean, crisp blue jeans. He looked sharp as hell. Remmick turned when they came in. Sasha picked up immediately that something was wrong with Remmick. There was the hesitation, the tension in his jaw and the way his hands were restless but held still.

“Remmick,” she said gently, “what’s wrong?”

Remmick looked away for a second, exhaling through his nose.

“I don’t know if I should go.”

Sasha’s face softened.

“Why not?”

Remmick gave a short laugh that held no humor.

“You know why not.”

Jimmy went quiet. Remmick stared out the window again toward the bright day outside.

“Smoke’s gonna be there. Annie. Stack. Mary. Sammie. Pearline. All of ’em from Club Juke.”

Remmick’s voice roughened a little.

“And I know none of them have forgiven me. Hell, I don’t blame ’em.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to come,” Sasha said as she stepped closer.

Remmick shook his head.

“I don’t know about that.”

Remmick swallowed once.

“I don’t know if I deserve to be goin’ out somewhere havin’ fun after what I did.”

That landed heavy. Sasha opened her mouth to answer, but Jimmy beat her to it.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jimmy said, not loudly, but with enough force to make both of them look at him.

Jimmy stepped farther into the room, his face serious now in a way that always hit harder because it wasn’t his default.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, “you fuckin’ do.”

Remmick blinked at him. Jimmy folded his arms, then unfolded them again almost immediately like the posture felt too defensive for what he wanted to say.

“You do deserve to go,” Jimmy said, “and if Smoke and Stack and the rest of them are there, then so fuckin’ what?”

Sasha went still, so did Remmick. Jimmy’s gaze held steady on him.

“That’s exactly why you *should* be there,” Jimmy continued. “So they can see you, not the old version, not the one from earth, not the one from Club Juke. *You. Now*.”

Remmick said nothing. Jimmy kept going, his voice sharp and certain.

“They’re never gonna see how much you’ve changed if you stay hidden in this nice, broody little beach house every time there’s a chance to stand in front of them and prove it.”

That hit. Remmick’s expression shifted, just slightly. Jimmy took another step toward him.

“And if any of them want to be dramatic about it, fine. Let them. But they’ll be lookin’ at a man who isn’t what he was anymore. A man who’s *better* now.”

Sasha’s eyes flicked to Jimmy with open surprise. He noticed it, ignored it, and kept his attention on Remmick.

“And if somebody decides they want to put hands on you,” Jimmy said, his voice hardening into something dangerous and very Sir Lord, “then Sasha will be there.”

“Absolutely,” Sasha said as she straightened immediately.

“And I’ll be there too,” Jimmy said, nodding once, “and I’m tellin’ you right now, if anybody gets stupid enough to try something with my older brother, I will rearrange their fuckin’ face and their whole fuckin’ afternoon.”

That stunned both of them. Remmick and Sasha stared with absolute surprise. Jimmy seemed faintly annoyed at being stared at.

“What?” Jimmy snapped at Sasha. “Don’t make it weird. I’m trying to have a supportive moment.”

Sasha let out a small breath that was half laugh, half emotion. Remmick’s face changed completely then, not all at once, but enough, enough for the fear in it to give a little ground. Enough for something steadier to come through. He walked over and, before Jimmy could brace for it, pulled him into a hug. Jimmy stiffened on instinct, not because he hated it, but because he was Jimmy. Then, after half a second, he let it happen. Remmick held him tight once, then let him go and pulled Sasha into a hug too.

“Thank you,” Remmick said quietly.

Then he looked back at Jimmy with something close to disbelief still in his eyes.

“And especially you,” Remmick said, “thank you.”

Jimmy made a face like gratitude made him itch.

“Aye, well,” Jimmy said, “family looks out for family, and if you repeat that in a tone I don’t like, I’ll deny the entire moment.”

Sasha smiled. Remmick smiled too.

“All right,” Sasha said, clapping her hands once. “Come on. Let’s go.”

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Scene Song: "Let's Groove" ~ Earth, Wind & Fire

A little after noon, Sasha's car rolled into Pelmont Park, and the reunion was already alive. The whole place looked sunlit and glorious, all broad green lawns and flowering borders, bright tables spread throughout the park in long colorful rows, and those glowing circular patterns set into the pavement near the center catching the light like they had their own pulse. The weather was perfect—seventy degrees, no clouds, not even a threat of rain—and the whole park hummed with the exact kind of electric warmth only a big family gathering could create. Children were everywhere, some were running wild across the grass in packs, shrieking and laughing. Some were jumping double dutch, the ropes slapping the pavement in quick rhythmic snaps while girls timed their jumps perfectly and the people around them cheered.

A few kids were tossing a ball back and forth near one of the open stretches of lawn. Others had taken over the nearby playground, climbing, sliding, swinging, racing each other from one side to the other with the serious joy only kids could bring to something that wasn't serious at all. And over all of it—over the laughter, the talking, the clatter of folding chairs and coolers and card tables—music blasted from the DJ setup near the edge of the park. Earth, Wind & Fire's "Let's Groove" rolled out through the air in bright, irresistible waves, turning the whole event into something that felt less like a cookout and more like a celebration the day itself had decided to host. The second Samson got out of the car and heard it, he clapped his hands once, loud and delighted, then let out a whistle and grinned so wide it looked like it physically hurt.

"Oh, yeah," Samson said while nodding. "I know right now this barbecue is about to be on *fire*!"

Ian laughed as he came around the other side of the car and then lightly bumped Samson's arm with his own.

"Look—Isla's here," Samson said, "and that lady from the last barbecue too. What's her name?"

Samson looked where Ian was pointing and immediately straightened a little while displaying a now intrigued smile.

"Deborah," Samson said with a brow raised, "and she looks *good* too."

Ian laughed.

"Come on, let's go on over," Ian said with a faint smile.

And just like that, the two of them headed off toward one of the tables, leaving the rest behind. Kellie watched them go and laughed under her breath. Jimmy took a slower look around: at the people, at the noise, at the color and movement and heat and life of it all. There were Black families gathered across multiple tables, Latino families, Mexican families, white families—cousins and aunties and uncles and kids and friends and neighbors all mixed into one big joyful afternoon. People were talking over each other, laughing hard, calling out across distances they could have walked instead, waving plates around while they told stories, getting louder with every good moment. Jimmy looked away after a second and let out a faint laugh of his own, something like disbelief sitting under it. Kellie noticed immediately.

"What's funny?" Kellie asked.

"This," he responded.

Kellie tilted her head with a brief and faint frown.

"This what?"

He made a small gesture with his ringed pointer finger toward the reunion like the whole scene was almost too much to summarize.

"This is a fuckin' first for me," Jimmy said with a faint smile.

Kellie watched him for half a second, then understood exactly what he meant. Then she laughed.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"It's *definitely* a good thing," Jimmy said, still with a half smile.

His eyes tracked the DJ, the dancing, the people calling to each other from table to table.

"This," he said, "feels like when Ian started playing 'Number of the Beast' back at the Bone Temple, and me and the Jimmies started dancing like a bunch of fuckin' idiots because the whole place was suddenly electric."

Kellie burst out laughing. Jimmy nodded toward the reunion.

"That's what this feels like right now," he said, "it feels—*electric*, *fire*, completely unhinged in the best possible way."

Kellie laughed even harder.

"That is—such a crazy comparison."

"And yet," Jimmy said with a brow raised, "I'm right."

He looked back toward the families, the laughter, the smoke rising off the grill, the music moving through the park.

“I *like* it,” he said.

Kellie’s smile softened. Jimmy shrugged once, but there was real feeling under it now.

“I like the people, I like the noise,” Jimmy continued, “I like the music, and with everybody laughing, eating, talking shite, acting ridiculous. It feels—*safe*.”

That made Kellie go quiet. Jimmy’s expression shifted, not broken, not overly emotional—just honest.

“It feels like what’s supposed to be right,” he said, “like what a normal life is supposed to look like.”

He swallowed once.

“Like the kind of day people are meant to have when everything in the world isn’t fuckin’ diseased and ruined.”

Kellie looked at him carefully, saying nothing. Jimmy let out a small breath through his nose.

“I think,” he said, quieter now, “I would’ve liked this.”

Kellie’s brow softened.

“Yeah?”

Jimmy nodded once.

“If the infection had never happened,” he said, “if my life had gone the way it was supposed to instead of turning into the shite it did…I think I would’ve wanted this, something loud and warm and fun like this.”

Kellie smiled gently as Jimmy displayed a half smile.

“So yeah,” he said, “it’s unhinged, but in the correct way.”

That made Kellie laugh again, softer this time.

Off to one side of the park, a huge grill smoked and sizzled while an older Black man worked it like a king at his post, flipping hamburgers, hot dogs, and other meat with the confidence of somebody who had fed entire reunions before and would feed ten more before he was done. The smell rolled across the park in thick, mouthwatering waves—char, smoke, seasoning, heat. The other tables were already full. People were eating, drinking beer and Kool-Aid, laughing mid-bite, arguing over card games that weren’t arguments at all. At one loud table, Bernie Mac, D.L. Hughley, Red Foxx, and Robin Williams were deep in a spades game that had somehow become both competitive and comedic chaos. Cards slapped down. Beer bottles lifted. Everybody talked over everybody else.

Half the table looked offended every thirty seconds, and not one of them meant it. Nearby, another table had settled into a loud round of I Declare War, with men and women leaning in, smacking cards down, talking trash, laughing too hard to hold any real grudge. At another table sat Smoke and Annie with their little girl, along with Stack and Mary, Sammie and Pearline, Cornbread and his wife, Delta Slim, Bo, and Grace. Also sitting at the table was Jack O'Connell, Michael B. Jordan, Ryan Coogler, and Chadwick Boseman. Plates were already filling. Drinks were sweating in the heat. Conversation moved in easy, overlapping currents. Elsewhere, Sasha's family had practically claimed a whole section for themselves—her mom, dad, aunts, uncles, all posted up together around a table full of food and noise and love.

A few feet away from them, Spike and his mom sat with Isla, Cathy and Tom, Jane Ji, Matthew, and George, doing what everybody else was doing—eating, laughing, talking, relaxing into the day. The whole park had a rhythm to it: music, laughter, children, smoke from the grill, card tables getting louder by the minute, folding chairs scraping, people greeting each other from across the lawn. The sun hitting bright tabletops and bright clothes and bright faces. It was cool. It was alive. It was *family*. And standing there in the middle of all that beautiful noise, with the song still blasting, the grill still smoking, Samson already halfway across the park toward trouble, and Jimmy Crystal looking around like he'd landed in some loud, joyful universe he hadn't known he needed.

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A little while later, Jimmy, Kellie, Sasha, Matthew, Cathy, Tom, and Jane Ji had settled around one of the tables with loaded plates, cold drinks, and the kind of loose, easy comfort that only came after the first wave of food had already hit. The DJ had switched songs, and now *The Gap Band's "Early In The Morning"* rolled through the park, bright and smooth and impossible not to nod along to. Around them, the reunion stayed alive in every direction—kids yelling near the playground, card players getting louder, people laughing too hard at stories they'd all heard before, smoke still lifting from the grill in delicious waves. At the table, the conversation had already bounced through three subjects in under five minutes.

"I'm just sayin'," Matthew said, pointing his fork at Tom, "men swear they know what women want, and then y'all go buy nonsense like giant teddy bears and gas station flowers."

Tom looked offended.

"First of all, gas station flowers can be solid in an emergency."

"Tom," Cathy said as she turned to stare at him with a faint frown and an amused smile.

"What?" Tom said. "I said *in an emergency*. I didn't say it was romantic. I said it was damage control."

Jane Ji laughed into her drink.

"That's the problem right there," Sasha said with a shake of her head, "men do everything like it's a last-minute school project."

“Exactly,” Jane Ji said with a smile and a nod.

“Oh, here we go,” Matthew muttered.

“No, she’s right,” Kellie said with a half smile, “women think ahead. Men wake up in panic and start improvising like they’re defusing a bomb.”

“Okay, that is wildly unfair,” Tom said with a smile and while leaning back.

“It’s wildly accurate,” Cathy said, smiling.

Jimmy, who had been paying attention to none of this for the last thirty seconds because he was too busy eating, suddenly cut in while pointing his fork at the center of the table.

“I’m sorry,” Jimmy said, mouth still half full, “can we pause this completely predictable fuckin’ war between the sexes and talk about whoever made this mac and cheese?”

Everybody looked at him. Jimmy slowly closed his eyes as he took another bite and smiled with a shake of his head.

“This,” Jimmy said, “is *filthily* good.”

Kellie laughed.

*“*Filthily?*”* Sasha said as she shook her head with a half smile.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, opening his eyes again. “Filthily. Obscenely. Criminally. This mac and cheese has no business being this good in public.”

Tom laughed.

“You’ve been talking about the food since you sat down.”

“Because the food,” Jimmy said with a tap of his fork on the table, “deserves respect.”

“The ribs?” Jimmy said as he pointed at his plate, “excellent. The mac and cheese? Dangerous. But *these*—”

Jimmy stopped and stabbed some collard greens dramatically and lifted them.

“—these right here? Oh, these are fuckin’ witchcraft.”

Matthew snorted.

“You really like the greens *that* much?” Jane Ji asked with a smile.

Jimmy looked at her like she’d asked whether air was useful.

“Jane Ji,” Jimmy said, deeply serious, “I would defend these collard greens with *physical violence*.”

That got a laugh out of the whole table. Then Jimmy reached for a square of cornbread, took a bite, paused, and frowned down at it.

“What?” Kellie asked, already smiling.

“Someone said this is called—cornbread—right?” Jimmy asked as he looked up slowly.

“Yeah,” Sasha responded, blinking once.

“That’s the name?” Jimmy asked after letting out a disbelieving laugh.

“Yes, Jimmy. Cornbread,” Jane Ji said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Jimmy looked around the table, increasingly amused by this.

“So,” Jimmy asked with a faint frown, “nobody sat down at any point and thought, I don’t know, maybe let’s call it something with a little mystery? A little elegance? No? You all just looked at it and went, yeah, that’s bread, and yeah, that’s corn, fuck it, *cornbread*?”

Kellie started laughing first, then Cathy, then Spike.

“Why is that so funny to you?” Sasha said with an amused smile.

“Because it’s so aggressively literal,” Jimmy said, laughing now in that bright, almost childlike way he did when something ridiculous genuinely delighted him. “It’s like calling orange juice *orange drink* or calling apple pie *apple circle*.”

Jane Ji laughed so hard she had to set her fork down.

“Apple circle is insane,” Tom said with a smile while pointing his fork at Jimmy.

“It’s *accurate*!” Jimmy said, smiling.

“It is not!” Sasha said before laughing.

“It absolutely *is*,” Jimmy shot back, then looked down at the cornbread again and laughed once more. “Cornbread. Brilliant. Deranged. No notes.”

“You’re so weird,” Kellie said as she smiled at him.

“And yet I’m right,” Jimmy said before he took another bite with complete dignity.

The table laughed again, and the conversation rolled on.

“So,” Cathy said after taking a sip of her drink, “since we’re apparently judging all of civilization today—favorite football teams. Go.”

“Ravens,” Matthew said immediately.

“Cowboys,” Tom said.

“That explains a lot,” Matthew said, giving Tom a hard look before faintly smiling.

Tom playfully threw a balled up napkin at Matthew as Matthew laughed.

“Ravens for me,” Sasha said with a smile.

“I can see that,” Jane Ji said, smiling and nodding.

“Well, I don’t have a deep emotional investment like y’all do, but if I had to pick one? Eagles,” Kellie said while leaning back in her chair.

“Respectable,” Matthew replied.

“I like the 49ers,” Cathy said with a shrug.

Then everybody looked at Jimmy. Jimmy was busy mopping up something on his plate with cornbread.

“What?” Jimmy said, glancing up slowly.

“Your team,” Kellie said.

“I don’t have one,” Jimmy said with a frown.

“You don’t have a football team?” Matthew asked with brows raised.

Jimmy swallowed his bite, dabbed the corner of his mouth with a napkin like a man above this entire line of inquiry, and said,

“I’ve survived infection, crucifixion, trauma, and public disgrace. You think somewhere in there I had time to develop loyalty to men in helmets?”

Cathy laughed.

“So you’ve never watched football?” Tom asked, smiling.

“I’ve seen football,” Jimmy said. “It appears to consist of ten seconds of action followed by forty-five minutes of fuckin’ committee meetings.”

Matthew nearly choked laughing.

“That’s not football,” Tom said after lightly laughing.

“That’s *exactly* football,” Jimmy said. “Everybody runs into each other, somebody falls down dramatically, then all of them stand around looking like they need legal counsel.”

“You’re impossible,” Kellie said before laughing and leaning against him.

“And yet,” Jimmy said, lifting his drink while displaying his signature Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal smile, “observant.”

They kept going like that—dating horror stories, dumb things men did when trying to impress women, dumb things women did when pretending they weren't interested in men they absolutely were interested in, which sports fans were the most delusional, whether it was worse to be ghosted or slowly texted to death, and which reunion dish was secretly carrying the entire event. Jimmy, for the record, maintained that the collard greens were "doing the heavy lifting of civilization." By the time Remmick appeared beside the table with a full plate in his hands, everybody was laughing again. Remmick stood there for a second, looking from face to face, then glanced around at the lack of space. Nobody moved. Remmick let out a short laugh through his nose—the kind that said he was already annoyed and trying not to show it too much. With that half-smile of his in place, he nodded toward the table.

"Any of y'all gonna make a little room, or am I just here for decoration?" Remmick asked.

Nobody answered right away. Jimmy took a drink.

"Really?" Remmick asked Jimmy while looking at him.

"Nope," Jimmy said after looking back at him blandly.

"*What*? *Nope*?" Remmick asked with a faint frown.

"Nope," Jimmy repeated, then gestured vaguely with his fork. "You're gonna have to find a seat somewhere else."

Remmick stared at him, openly stunned now.

"I don't *want* to sit somewhere else," Remmick said.

Jimmy took another bite.

"I want to sit here," Remmick continued with a frown, "with y'all. You're the only people I really know here, and the only people actually willing to talk to me besides folks I don't know at all."

That made Sasha glance at Jimmy, suspicious already. Jimmy sighed with theatrical annoyance, stabbed his fork down into his collard greens like he was knifing an infected who had somehow clawed its way into the afterlife, then rolled his eyes and shoved back from the table. He stood, walked around and stopped in front of Remmick. Then, with pure Sir Lord Jimmy swagger, he slung an arm around Remmick's shoulders and turned him slightly toward the other tables.

"Right," Jimmy said. "Enough of this."

Remmick frowned.

"Enough of what?"

"Enough of you trying to sit here and hide with us like some broody beach ghost," Jimmy responded.

A few people at the table smiled already, catching on. Jimmy pointed across the reunion with his free hand toward the table where Smoke, Annie, their little girl, Stack, Mary, Sammie, Pearline, Cornbread, Delta Slim, Bo, and Grace were sitting.

“Now,” Jimmy said, “is the time.”

“Jimmy,” Remmick said as his face tightened. “I—”

“No.” Jimmy shook him lightly once by the shoulder. “No, no, no. Look, today is exactly the day you close the gap between you and Smoke and Stack and the rest of them by doing something radical and emotionally inconvenient.”

“Which is?” Remmick asked as he narrowed his eyes.

Jimmy gave him a look.

“Seeking forgiveness. Again. In person. Like a man.”

Remmick went quiet. Jimmy’s tone shifted—not softer, but more serious under the theatrics.

“Today tells you where it stands,” Jimmy said. “Whether they’re anywhere near forgiving you or whether they’re not. But you are never gonna find that out by planting your ass over here with me and hiding behind potato salad.”

That made Tom laugh under his breath. Remmick sighed and briefly closed his eyes, with a faint frown on his face.

“And what if they don’t want me sittin’ there?”

Jimmy didn’t even hesitate.

“Then you say *fuck them* and come back over here.”

That made Remmick look at him. Jimmy shrugged one shoulder.

“I’m serious,” Jimmy said. “You changed. You asked for forgiveness. You did the hard part. If they still don’t want to forgive you, then that’s on them, not you. The only thing that actually matters is that you’re not the same bastard you were before.”

Remmick stared at him for a second. Jimmy kept going, because once he got rolling with conviction, he tended to roll all the way downhill.

“They’ll never see that if you don’t go over there and *let* them though.” Jimmy continued. “So go. Sit down. Be respectful. Say what you need to say. If it goes badly, come back here, eat some ribs, and move on with your life.”

That drew a laugh out of Tom. Remmick let out a slow breath, then another. He nodded once.

“All right,” Remmick said quietly. Then he looked at Jimmy.

“Thank you,” Remmick said.

Jimmy made a face like gratitude was making his skin itch.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, don’t turn this into a whole emotional ceremony in the middle of the barbecue,” Jimmy said with a sour frown.

A tiny smile tugged at Remmick’s mouth despite himself. Then he nodded once more and started walking toward Smoke and Stack’s table. Jimmy watched him go for a second, then dropped back into his seat with all the casual bonelessness of a playful kid who had just finished interfering in somebody else’s life on purpose. He picked up a spare rib, bit into it, and settled back like he hadn’t just delivered a genuinely solid piece of advice.

“You know,” Cathy said to Jimmy while smiling, “I honestly did not have ‘Jimmy inspiring people’ on my reunion bingo card.”

Tom nodded solemnly.

“Yeah, this is new,” Tom chimed in with a half smile. “I feel like we should all document it before he denies it.”

Jane Ji laughed. Jimmy chewed, swallowed, then leaned back with full Sir Lord arrogance reinstalled and polished.

“Well,” Jimmy said, waving one hand. “I’m an extraordinarily gifted and deeply underappreciated source of wisdom. It’s not my fault the rest of you are only just catching up.”

That got a loud burst of laughter from the table. Jimmy lifted the spare rib slightly, like a king accepting tribute.

“I contain multitudes,” Jimmy declared, “beauty. trauma. insight. impeccable instincts. A near-prophetic understanding of collard greens.”

Sasha laughed so hard she had to put her cup down.

“Jesus, he’s unbearable,” Tom said after laughing lightly with a slight shake of his head.

“And yet,” Jimmy said with his signature half smile before taking another bite, “correct at the same time.”

The table cracked up again, and over at the other table, Remmick kept walking.

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Scene Song: “Chamber Of Reflection” ~ Mac DeMarco

With a red plastic cup in hand, Remmick was making his way over to the table where Smoke, Stack, Annie, Mary, Cornbread and the others were. Remmick moved toward the table slowly with his shoulders set, face composed in that careful way people get when they're trying to look normal while walking into a place that can still hurt them. Jack O'Connell saw him first. Jack leaned in toward Michael B. Jordan, with a smile already beginning to curl before Remmick even got close enough to hear anything. Jack lowered his voice and muttered,

"Right, here we go," Jack said. "This is about to turn catastrophically fucking awkward in about twelve seconds."

Michael glanced over, saw Remmick coming, and a laugh slipped out of him before he could stop it.

"Oh, no," Michael murmured back, smiling. "That ain't awkward. That's full family-cookout dysfunction walking straight at us with a damn cup in his hand."

Jack huffed a laugh through his nose and shook his head.

"Good then," Jack responded. "We've got front-row seats, then."

At the table, everybody else was in the middle of laughing about something already in motion. Smoke had just said something dry enough to make Mary laugh into her drink. Stack was leaning back with that easy, dangerous smile of his, one arm slung over the back of his chair like the whole afternoon belonged to him. Annie had her little girl in her lap, helping her tear apart a piece of cornbread. Sammie was talking to Pearline who was sitting next to him, half serious and half amused. Cornbread's wife had one hand over her mouth, laughing.

Bo and Grace were mid-reaction to whatever story had just landed. Then Remmick reached the table and he cleared his throat softly. It wasn't loud. Didn't need to be. It cut through the laughter anyway. The whole table didn't go silent at once, but it bent toward silence. Eyes turned. Smiles faltered. The air shifted. Remmick gave a faint frown—not attitude, nerves. His fingers tightened once around the cup.

"Afternoon," Remmick said, his voice low, polite, carrying that Irish grain under the Southern drag. "Mind if I sit at the table with you all?"

Smoke looked up. The second he saw him, he sucked his teeth so hard it was almost theatrical. Then he leaned slightly toward Stack and Bo, eyes still on Remmick, and muttered something low and ugly enough to make both men bark out laughter. Whatever it was, it wasn't kind. Remmick's face tightened a little more. Smoke leaned back in his chair and answered without hesitation.

"Hell yeah we mind," Smoke responded. "Sit your vampiric ass on the ground somewhere. Or over in the dirt. Matter fact, find you a nice patch of shade and be grateful."

Bo laughed loudly. Stack laughed too, that slick low laugh of his that always sounded like trouble was enjoying itself. Even Delta Slim—sitting half-turned with a drink in one hand—let out a brief hum of amusement through his nose, though his eyes stayed sharper than the others'. Remmick didn't laugh; he just stood there and swallowed hard. His throat moved

visibly as he looked at Smoke for a long second—too long for it to be casual. Not defiant. Not yet. Just...*searching*, trying to understand, trying, maybe, one last damn time, to figure out why kindness from Smoke had always seemed like something permanently locked away.

And the worst part was, some old part of him *knew* this feeling. Even back on Earth, before Smoke had known what Remmick really was, there had been something cold in him. Suspicion. Hostility. That first stiffness. That readiness. That look in Smoke's eye was like a hand already halfway to a gun before there was a reason for one. Remmick had felt that chill before the blood, before the stake, before Club Juke turned into a graveyard. Now here it was again. Cleaner, maybe. *Human*. But just as sharp. It hit him. You could see it hit him. Remmick's mouth pressed thin. Then the tension in it gave way. His frown changed into a shape that wasn't anger, not quite, no, it was more so a shape of sadness, *real* sadness. It was the kind of sadness that made his face look younger and older at the same time. He bit briefly at the cleft of his upper lip, nodded once, and looked down.

"Okay then," Remmick said quietly.

And then Remmick turned to go.

"Remmick—oi, hold up," Jack said, his voice cutting across the moment quickly and clearly.

Remmick paused. Jack was already half out of his chair, hand lifted.

"Come back here, Remmick," Jack said. "Sit down."

Smoke's head snapped toward him so fast it looked like the words had physically offended him.

"The hell?" Smoke shot back. "Ain't nobody ask for that cracka at this damn table."

That landed hard enough to make the space around it tighten. Jack stared at Smoke with a surprised frown, then let out one short, disbelieving laugh and shook his head.

"*Wow*," Jack said with a faint smile and a shake of his head, "all right."

Michael sat forward instantly.

"Hold up," Michael said, his voice firm now. "We're not going to start throwing that kind of shit around."

Smoke cut his eyes to Michael.

"Man, shut up. Wasn't nobody talkin' to you. You think because you played me in some damn movie, you have a right to put your damn two cents into this?"

Michael laughed once, not because it was funny, but because Smoke's attitude had blown right past reason and into pure irritation.

"Look, it doesn't matter whether you were talking to me or not," Michael said, sharply now. "I'm *saying* that he can sit here whether you like it or not."

Smoke opened his mouth to speak whatever smart clapback that had just entered his mind, but Annie squeezed his hand tightly before giving him a look that said: *"Just let it go, Elijah."*

"Yeah. Enough of this bullshit. Seriously," Jack said after nodding.

The whole table had shifted by then. Cornbread stopped smiling. Mary's mouth tightened. Annie looked at Smoke, then at Remmick. Sammie's jaw set. Stack's eyes flicked between faces, amused but watchful. Pearline went still in the way people do when they know they're one sentence away from something turning. Remmick looked at Jack first, then Michael. That sad frown was still there. It hadn't left.

"Thank y'all," Remmick said quietly, "really, but it's all right."

Michael frowned.

"No, it's not all right—"

"It is," Remmick said, though his voice didn't believe it. "I just thought I'd sit with the only folks I know here. That's all, but there's no need to make it a whole issue."

He started to turn again, but Michael was up before he got two steps.

"Nah," Michael said.

Michael crossed the small gap, caught Remmick lightly by the arm—not rough, not possessive, just enough to stop him from doing that lonely retreating thing wounded men get too good at—and steered him back toward the table.

"No," Michael repeated. "You're sitting down right here because this is where you belong right now."

Remmick exhaled hard through his nose and rolled his eyes once, but there was no real fight in it.

"Shit," Remmick muttered.

"Yeah, yeah," Michael said. "Save it. Sit."

And Remmick took a seat, not beside Smoke though. Michael wasn't stupid. Remmick ended up between Jack and the far edge of the table, across enough distance from Smoke to breathe. His cup settled in front of him. His posture stayed upright, but not relaxed. Not by a long shot. He looked like a man sitting in a church after being told he was allowed in, still waiting for someone to change their mind. For a minute or two, the table tried to find its rhythm again. The conversation stumbled, then picked itself back up. The subject, somehow, had been music before he arrived, and now it found its way back there—because in a group like this, with Sammie sitting there and Stack grinning like he knew every good record by touch, music was safer than feelings until it wasn't.

Sammie was talking about the roots of Delta blues and how too many folks reduced it to pain without hearing the craft in it. Pearline had been arguing that half the people who claimed to love the blues only loved the myth of suffering around it. Jack, to his credit, was listening like he actually meant to learn something. Michael was halfway joking and halfway serious about how every era thought it had invented heartbreak in a song.

Delta Slim had started in about slide guitar; and Mary had cut in to say that some men only liked music that gave them an excuse to moan dramatically in public, that got a laugh, all of it kept moving—except Remmick. He barely said a word, he just sat with one forearm resting near his cup, staring down into the red drink like there might be something at the bottom of it worth studying. Every now and then, his eyes lifted when someone else laughed, then dropped again. Not sulking. Not pouting. Just...quiet in a way that didn't belong at a table this alive. Stack noticed first because of course he did. Stack turned in his chair, that signature smile of his curling up slowly like he'd just found an opening worth taking.

"Well, hell," Stack drawled. "Remmick probably don't know a damn thing about what we talkin' about anyway."

Remmick glanced up. Stack leaned an elbow on the table and tilted his head.

"You know who Charley Patton is?" Stack asked with a faint smile.

That did it, the whole table looked at Remmick now, and Remmick, for one suspended second, didn't answer, not because he didn't know, but because he was trying to decide whether opening his mouth at all was worth what might come after it. Whether this was a real question or just bait dressed up in culture. Whether speaking would make things better or only remind everybody he was still here, still taking up air, still an irritation in a seat some of them had not wanted him to occupy. Before Remmick could choose, Smoke scoffed.

"Please," Smoke said. "That white man don't know shit about the blues. So you know damn well he don't know who no damn Charley Patton is."

Remmick's eyes cut to him instantly.

"I *do* so know who Charley Patton is," Remmick said, his voice flat.

Smoke gave a hard little laugh.

"No you don't, stop it before you embarrass yourself at this whole motherfuckin' table."

Remmick frowned at Smoke with annoyance.

"*No*, I'm not stoppin' a damn thing," Remmick snapped, his heat already rising into his tone. "I *said* I know who he is."

Smoke leaned forward, his expression turning mean in that familiar, exhausted way.

"Nah," Delta Slim said. "What you *know* is how to take from Black folks, and how to twist your mouth around what *we* built, and then act like knowin' a name means you understand a damn thing."

“Uh-huh, exactly, Slim,” Smoke said with a brow raised and a simple nod.

Jack shifted in his seat, but Michael’s hand came out quickly and caught his forearm under the table, and as Jack glanced at him. Michael looked at him with his eyes saying: *not yet, let’s let this play out.* Remmick’s jaw flexed as he looked from Smoke to Stack, then to the others, then back again.

“*Damn* it,” Remmick said, louder now, “I’m gettin’ real tired of—”

“You know what I’m tired of?” Smoke cut in.

Remmick stopped, Smoke did not.

“I’m tired of seein’ your motherfuckin’ *face*,” Smoke said, his voice hard as split wood. “I’m tired of lookin’ at the man who walked into Club Juke and murdered *every* fuckin’ body I knew. I’m tired of hearin’ you talk like there’s some version of this where we owe you fuckin’ patience!”

That hit the table like a dropped brick. Remmick’s whole body went still, then the anger in him broke open.

“Damn it, I—I *said* I was *sorry*, Smoke!” Remmick snapped, loud enough to turn heads at the next table. “I *apologized*! Hell, I *cried* and apologized! And I meant it *then* and I *mean* it now!”

Remmick’s voice came rough and full, shaking with real heat. His eyes were alive with it now—bright, wet, furious.

“I’ve stood in front of y’all and told the *truth*!” Remmick went on. “I know I did bad things down on Earth, I *know* it! But I’m *not* the same *man* I was on Earth, and I keep *telling* you all that!”

The laughter around the table had vanished. Even the noise of the reunion seemed farther away for a second, like this table had become its own weather. Remmick pushed on.

“Pelmont’s supposed to be a place where a soul can *change*,” Remmick continued, his voice fierce now and his chest rising hard, “a place where remorse *means* somethin,’ a place where people can become *more* than the worst thing they ever did! So when the *hell* am I supposed to stop *paying* for what I already know was *evil,* damn it?! When do any of y’all let me be *more* than that one damn night?!”

Smoke stared at him without blinking. Remmick’s voice broke around the edges then—not losing force, just gaining hurt.

“I mean, *shit*, it’s been a *month*!” Remmick continued, “a whole damn month of y’all watchin’ me move through this realm differently—*carefully*—*-respectfully*, and with me keepin’ my distance and *owning* what I’ve done! I mean, I’ve been really *trying*! And once again I—”

Remmick stopped as he briefly looked down with a deep frown of hurt as his throat worked and his eyes flooded openly now.

“I'm genuinely, *genuinely sorry*,” Remmick said, in a softer, tearful tone. “I don’t know how many times I have to keep saying that.”

Remmick’s tears spilled then, steady, unwanted and real, and because there was no getting them back, he let them come.

“All I’m askin’ for is forgiveness,” Remmick said, his tearful voice quieter now but no less intense. “I just want a second chance, not to erase what happened because I know damn well I can’t *do* that. But I’m just askin’ for a chance to *redeem* myself in your eyes, to build somethin’ other than fear between us all.”

Remmick looked around the table then—not just at Smoke. At Annie. At Sammie. At Mary. At Cornbread. At Bo. At Pearline. At Stack. At all the faces that had once belonged to a room he ruined.

“I’m not askin’ to be let into some damn club,” Remmick said, “I’m just askin’ not to live forever as a ghost outside of one.”

That line landed; even Jack went still. Remmick wiped his tears away once, angry at the tears and too full of feeling to stop.

“Besides Jimmy and Sasha,” Remmick said, “I don’t *know* anyone here, *no* one. And that loneliness—”

Remmick stopped and shook his head once, a rough breath leaving him.

“That loneliness will tear at you if you let it. I know what it is to be cut off, to have no people, to stand outside every warm room and know you are the reason the door stays shut.”

Remmick’s voice lowered again and deepened. Nobody interrupted him now, so he said the rest.

“But,” Remmick said with a slight shake of his head, “even though I want your forgiveness as bad as I do—I’m *not* gonna spend eternity chasin’ after it like a damn dog. I *won’t*.”

That changed the air again, because now there was steel under the grief.

“You deserve peace after what happened,” Remmick said. “Every one of you do, but so do *I*. Whether you all care about what happened to me or not. Whether you believe in my pain or not. I went through tragic things *too*. I saw my family get *destroyed*, I saw the ruin of my own *soul*. But then I became remorseful for all the things I did *because* of what I went through, and so I sought y’all out, and I *owned* it.”

Remmick’s voice sharpened.

“So yeah,” Remmick said, “I deserve peace in the afterlife too.”

Smoke looked at Delta Slim first. Slim wasn't smiling anymore. Then Cornbread—Cornbread's face had gone strange—less hard, more cornered by conscience than he wanted to be. Then Stack, Stack's mouth had lost its easy curl. He looked down briefly, jaw moving. Then Annie—Annie already had that faint, pained frown on her face—the one that showed up when truth was inconvenient but undeniable. Remmick saw all of it, and something in him settled, not into comfort, but into decision. Remmick stood and his chair scraped back softly against the pavement.

"All right, fine," Remmick said, his voice rough again, "that's enough, I'll find some other table."

Remmick snatched up his cup and turned to walk away

"Where in hell you goin'?" Smoke asked in a cold, icy tone, his voice stopping Remmick in his tracks.

Remmick paused, then glanced back over one shoulder.

"I'm goin' where I can find the peace I *just* talked about," Remmick responded. "Somewhere that doesn't come with gettin' dragged back through the same earthly mistakes every damn time somebody sees my face."

Remmick started to walk again but Smoke spoke again without looking at him.

"Come back and sit down."

The tone was cold, low and controlled, causing Remmick to stop in his tracks again before turning all the way around, anger flashing back into him.

"Why, Smoke?" Remmick snapped, "so you can keep on beratin' me? Keep treatin' me like shit every time I try to come near?"

A beat passed, then two, then Smoke finally looked up at him. And when Smoke spoke, his voice was still icy—but there was something else in it now, something harder to say than contempt.

"No," Smoke said, "because this table ain't complete with you gone."

Smoke's jaw flexed once.

"We all in this mess," Smoke continued, "whether we like it or not, and if this table got everybody tied up in what happened…then it needs everybody tied up in what happened sittin' at it too."

The words weren't warm, and they sure weren't elegant. They came out dragged over pride and barbed with resistance, but they were real. Remmick stared at him as his eyes glistened again. He looked at Smoke, then at Annie and Annie gave him the smallest nod, her mouth set in that faint frown that meant: *don't make us regret this.* Slowly, Remmick came back and sat down, carefully and quietly, like a man re-entering a room after being told the floor might hold him after all.

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Scene Song: "The Parting Glass" ~ The Walking Dead Soundtrack

Later, the barbecue had settled into that soft, heavy part of the afternoon where the sun had gone rich instead of sharp, and folks had eaten enough to start telling the truth by accident. The DJ had eased into something smoother now, low enough to sit under conversation instead of fighting it. Children tore across the grass in shrieking little packs. Smoke from the grill drifted in warm, lazy ribbons through the park. Somewhere off to the left, a card table exploded into loud cussing and laughter over a bad hand of spades, and then settled again. At the table, plates had been pushed around, drinks refilled, chairs tipped back. The conversation had turned to family, but not in some polished, sentimental way, in the *real* way, the way people talked when memory had teeth in it. Stack leaned back with one arm hanging loose over the chair, his expression easy, but his voice had gone lower, more lived-in.

"Christmas wasn't never really Christmas for us the way folks like to pretend it is now," Stack said. "Wasn't no whole day belongin' to you, wasn't no peace to it. You took what little bit they let you have and made somethin' out of that."

Annie nodded beside him.

"That's right," Annie said, "a lot of times it wasn't even the day itself. Might be the night before, might be somebody sneakin' food together, tryin' to make somethin' feel special when everybody already tired."

Grace folded her hands near her cup and gave a small, knowing nod.

"In my family," Grace said, "the best part was just everybody bein' in the same place if they could be. That alone was enough to make it feel different."

Bo glanced at her, quieter now.

"That's the truth," Bo said, "didn't even have to be much food, didn't have to be gifts. Just your people all there at once…that was somethin'."

Annie shifted her little girl higher on her lap, smoothing a hand over the child's curls.

"My mama used to hum while she cooked," Annie said softly. "Not because there was plenty. Usually, there wasn't. But she'd hum anyway. And when I think about that time of year, that's what I remember first. Her hummin' like she was tryin' to keep fear out of the room."

The table got quieter. Smoke glanced at her, and some of the iron in his face eased. Sammie sat with his forearms on the table, eyes a little distant now.

“We had music,” Sammie said. “Not all dressed up, not no concert. Just…sound. Somebody tappin’ rhythm on wood, somebody singin’ spirituals real low, somebody hummin’ while work still in their bones.”

Sammie paused.

“That mattered,” Sammie continued, “when folks ain’t got much, sound can still make a room feel like it belong to you.”

Delta Slim gave a little hum of agreement and tipped his cup toward Sammie.

“That’s because music go where freedom can’t always go,” Slim said.

Pearline looked down for a second, then up again.

“My people used to save the sweetest part of whatever they had for the children,” Pearline said, “even if it was little. A spoonful extra of somethin’. A piece set aside. Somethin’ that said: *I see you. I know this world hard. Here.*”

Cornbread’s wife smiled faintly at that.

“Yeah,” she said. “Women be doin’ that. Stretchin’ a meal till it feel like mercy.”

Cornbread rubbed his chin, expression more subdued than usual.

“My old folks used to tell stories,” Cornbread said. “That’s what I remember. Late. Quiet. Tired as hell. But still talkin’. Talkin’ ’bout people gone. Talkin’ ’bout kin. Tryin’ to keep names alive.”

“Mm-hmm,” Bo said while nodding.

Jack, who had been listening more carefully now, leaned in slightly.

“So what was the best part then?” Jack asked. “If it wasn’t really the holiday itself — what was the thing y’all held onto?”

It was Annie who answered first.

“When nobody got sold,” Annie responded.

No one laughed. No one even moved much, because that was the truth of it, and it landed clean. Annie’s voice stayed soft, but it had a steadiness in it now.

“When everybody still there,” Annie said, “when you look around and count heads and don’t come up short. That was a good day.”

Smoke stared down at the table for a second, jaw flexing.

“Yeah,” Smoke said, “that was a real good day.”

Grace exhaled through her nose.

“You learned not to assume too much,” Grace said, “learned not to get too comfortable with joy, neither.”

Mary nodded once.

“But you still reached for it.”

“You had to,” Pearline said. “Else what was left of you?”

Michael sat back a little, his face having lost some of its easy playfulness.

“Damn,” Michael said softly.

Jack looked down at his drink and rolled it once between his hands.

“So even family dinner,” Jack said slowly, “even being together…that wasn’t something you could count on?”

“Count on?” Stack repeated with a short, humorless laugh. “No.”

Stack looked over at Jack.

“You appreciated people while they was in front of you,” Stack said. “That’s what you counted on. That moment. That night. That meal. That laugh. ’Cause tomorrow might come in ugly.”

Sammie nodded.

“And even when folks was all together,” Sammie added, “they weren’t rested. Weren’t safe. A holiday didn’t stop white folks from ownin’ the next mornin’.”

That sentence sat heavily at the table. Bo tried to break the weight of it a little.

“And somebody always still found a reason to get on your nerves though,” Bo muttered.

That got a few smiles loose.

“You mean you,” Grace said with a faint smile as she glanced at him.

Bo looked offended.

“Hey, I am a joy,” he said while faintly smiling.

“You are a problem,” Grace corrected with a smile of her own.

That drew a little laughter around the table, enough to let people breathe again.

“Nah, every family got one loud fool who think he funny,” Cornbread said.

“That’d be you too,” Cornbread’s wife said.

Cornbread turned to her with a faint frown.

“Now why I’m catchin’ strays?”

“Because you standin’ in the road,” Cornbread’s wife replied.

Smoke and Stack laughed. Even Annie smiled into her cup.

Michael looked around the table.

“So what about dislikes then?” Michael asked, “since y’all done already started exposin’ family business.”

“I disliked how folks had to whisper happiness,” Annie said, “that’s what I disliked.”

The table went still again, gentler this time. Annie looked out across the park for a second, at children running free in broad daylight.

“Like joy had to stay small,” Annie continued, “like if it got too loud, somebody would come remind you who you belonged to.”

Smoke didn’t say anything, but his face changed. Michael glanced down the table, his expression quieter now. Jack too. And through it all, Remmick hadn’t said a word; he didn’t even laugh when anyone said anything humorous. He just sat with his cup in his hand, staring into it. Every memory they spoke was warm, yes—but only because it had survived brutality. That was what made it worse, not soft nostalgia but hard-earned tenderness. Family held together with thread and prayer and stolen moments. And somewhere inside Remmick, that touched the same wound from a different angle: his *mother’s* hands, his *father’s* voice, *Róisín’s* laugh, the home before the ruin, the people before history tore through them. Remmick kept his face still as long as he could. Then Bo, who had gone quiet for a beat after Grace checked him, turned and looked at him. Bo's voice, when he spoke, wasn’t mocking; it was simple, human, *curious*.

“Hey, Remmick,” Bo said. “What about you? Since you been in Pelmont…your family around anywhere? You reunite with ’em yet?”

The table changed, not loudly, just enough. Remmick went still. His eyes stayed on the cup in his hand, but the focus went out of them. His mouth tightened into a deep frown as the question hit him square in the chest. He tried — visibly *tried* — not to let it reach his face. He tried to take it like a man. He tried to keep the thing sealed down, but it got through anyway. Remmick swallowed—*hard*. When he answered, his voice was already slightly tearful.

“No,” Remmick said.

The word barely made it out. A hush moved over the table, subtle but total. Remmick’s fingers tightened around the cup. He still didn’t look up.

“I've been searchin’ for near a month,” Remmick said in a low voice, “for my parents…and my sister.”

The words "*sister*" nearly undid him by themselves. Remmick swallowed again with his jaw flexing and with him fighting the weakness in his voice and losing some of that fight anyway.

"Haven't found 'em," Remmick said, "not one sign, not one trace. And for some reason…"

Remmick stopped and drew in a breath through his nose.

"For some reason, thought-intention ain't even workin' for me with them. I try to call 'em here—try to manifest 'em into Pelmont—and nothin'."

The last word came rough. Remmick's eyes had gone glassy now. He stared down into the cup so hard it seemed like he was trying to disappear into it. Then, because the truth had already broken skin, more of it followed.

"I miss 'em so, *so* much," Remick said softly.

That one came almost under his breath, no performance, no dramatic flourish, just a wounded confession dragged out of someplace raw.

"That's why I wanted Sammie's music," Remmick said, his voice thickening. "That's why I wanted his gift *so bad*. So I could reunite with my family."

Now the tears were there for real, pooling and blurring the world in front of him.

"For years," Remmick said, lower now, "for centuries…I've felt *so* damn lonely without 'em. So *empty*."

Remmick's throat worked.

"And then I get here. I get to the afterlife. And I'm still not with 'em."

That did it. Tears slid down his face in clean, helpless lines. Remmick bit down hard on his lower lip — hard enough it turned white under his teeth — trying to stop the sobs he could feel building in his chest like floodwater behind a door. He kept his head angled down, shoulders too tight, fighting for control with *everything* he had. Around the table, faces changed. Annie's expression softened first, not into pity but into ache. Mary looked stricken. Pearline's mouth tightened. Even Smoke, who had spent so much of the day armored against Remmick on instinct, looked at him now with something complicated and quiet passing through his face. Jack was the one who spoke, and when he did, the usual dryness in him was gone.

"Jesus," Jack said softly. "Remmick…"

Remmick didn't look up. Jack leaned forward a little, forearms on the table, his voice gentler now than it had been all day.

"I'm really sorry," Jack said. "I mean that. I can't…I can't imagine gettin' to the afterlife and not being with my mum, or my family. I can't imagine that kind of emptiness."

Remmick gave one tiny nod without lifting his head, like even acknowledgement hurt. Stack, who had gone more serious than usual, looked from Remmick to Jack and then over at Michael.

“How’d y’all end up here anyway?” Stack asked. “You and him.”

Michael exhaled through his nose and sat back a little, expression changing as memory crossed it.

“The world went crazy,” Michael said, “that’s the short version.”

Jack gave a brief, humorless laugh.

“That’s definitely the short version,” Jack said.

Michael nodded once, then looked around the table.

“Me and Jack were in California,” Michael said, “workin’ on a film project. This guy named Martin Scorsese was directing. The whole thing was moving fast, everyone was busy, everyone was thinking they had more time.”

Michael’s face tightened slightly.

“Then that tsunami came,” Michael said.

A few people at the table straightened. Michael’s voice stayed even, but the image in it made the words heavier.

“It hit hard,” Michael said, “not just a wave, but a whole damn wall of water. And California —”

Michael shook his head once.

“California got drowned under it. Like the ocean decided it was finished being polite.”

The table had gone dead quiet.

“And while all that was happening,” Michael continued, “earthquakes started breaking loose in other places, volcanoes too. It just seemed like the whole world was tearing open all at once.”

Jack took over from there, his voice low and dry in that way that made it sound even more real.

“Yeah,” Jack said, “it was like the planet just collapsed in on itself. Literally.”

Jack looked down briefly at his cup, then back up.

“Me and Michael didn’t survive it. A lot of people didn’t. One minute we were there thinking about work and schedules and ordinary stupid shit.”

Jack let out a small breath.

“And the next thing, we’re here,” Jack added.

“Damn,” Delta Slim said while shaking his head once.

“Damn is an understatement when it comes to all that,” Bo muttered in a low, genuine tone.

Annie looked back at Remmick then, still gentle-eyed in spite of herself.

“Do you know where your parents and your sister are?” Annie asked quietly.

Remmick shook his head before she’d even finished. He wiped at his face fast, almost angrily, like if he did it quickly enough no one would see the tears streaming.

“No,” Remmick replied.

Remmick’s voice was ragged now.

“No, I don’t.” Remmick swallowed and forced the rest out, “and there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about ’em. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t wish I could have ’em back.”

Remmick's throat tightened on the last word. Nobody rushed to fill the silence this time. Nobody tried to pretty it up, and maybe that was exactly why he couldn’t sit there another second. Remmick took in one shaky breath, reached for his cup, and pushed his chair back.

“I—” Remmick stopped, cleared his throat and tried again. “I need to go get a refill.”

It was a lie; everybody at the table knew it was a lie in the same way people in Pelmont knew certain things without being told. The realm moved with that kind of quiet supernatural knowing—not loud, not theatrical, just there. They knew he wasn’t going for a drink. They knew he was trying to get away before the grief cracked open wide enough to drown him in public. Remmick stood too fast and as more tears were already coming, he turned away before the table could watch the next ones fall.

“Excuse me,” Remmick said in a low voice.

Then he walked off almost quickly, shoulders set too hard, one hand tight around the cup, the other wiping his tears away as he crossed back into the noise and sunshine of the barbecue. And behind him, the table watched him go in silence. Smoke’s jaw worked once. Annie looked down at the tabletop, then at her daughter. Jack exhaled slowly and rubbed a hand over his mouth. Michael sat very still, his eyes following Remmick across the grass. Because for all the music and food and sunlight and family noise filling Pelmont Park that afternoon, there was no mistaking what had just passed through that table: A man could get to the afterlife and still be lonely enough to break.

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Scene Song: "The Parting Glass" ~ The Walking Dead Soundtrack / "Never Meant To Be" ~ Evergreen

Remmick didn't make it far before the strength went out of his face. He moved away from the barbecue too fast for it to look natural, one hand tight around his drink, the other swiping uselessly at tears that would not stop coming. Behind him, the reunion kept living — laughter rising in bursts, the DJ rolling one song into another, children yelling near the playground, the sharp slap of cards hitting folding tables, the smell of smoke and meat and sweet sauce drifting through the hot air like joy had no idea a man's heart had just been ripped wide open twenty yards away. He hated that.

He hated that the world stayed bright. He hated that everybody else got to keep eating and laughing and talking about family while he walked off with the shape of his own loneliness cutting him apart from the inside. The basketball court sat off to one side of the park beyond a strip of grass and a low fence, close enough that the barbecue noise still reached it, far enough that the sound came softened — blurred by distance into something almost cruel. The blacktop held the sun in a dull sheen. White painted lines cut across it in clean geometry. One hoop stood at the far end with a chain net that shifted every now and then in the breeze, giving off a thin metallic rattle like a ghost of applause. Near the fence sat a bench. Remmick made it there and sat down hard.

For a few seconds, he just stared ahead, breathing through his nose, trying to get himself under control. His drink trembled faintly between both hands. The red liquid inside shook with him. His jaw flexed once. Then again. He swallowed so hard it hurt. Family, Christmas, a mother humming in a kitchen, people counting heads and being grateful nobody was missing, people holding onto moments because tomorrow might come ugly. Every word from that table had stayed inside him like shrapnel. His eyes burned again. He stared at the court but didn't see it. What he saw instead was green grass wet with evening. A little stone house. Smoke from a hearth. His mother's hands, his father's laugh, Róisín spinning in the yard with her red hair catching the light like it had stolen fire for itself. A broken breath slipped out of him.

"*No*," he whispered.

He bit down hard on the inside of his lip and blinked fast, angry at himself. He had already cried at the table. He was not going to sit out here in broad daylight and come apart like some shattered old fool just because the universe had reminded him of what it had taken. Then his sister's face rose in his mind with brutal clarity — freckles, white dress, little bare feet in grass, the way she smiled like the world had never once threatened her. That did it. Sitting his cup beside him on the bench, Remmick folded forward with his elbows on his knees. His hands covered his face as a sob hit him *hard*, his shoulders jerked once, then again.

He tried to hold it in. He tried to breathe through it, but he *couldn't*. The grief came up like it had been waiting just outside his ribs for centuries. A second sob tore loose, then a third, and soon he was crying into his hands with all the raw helplessness of a man who had spent too

long pretending he could survive absence without it hollowing him out. His shoulders shook violently. Tears fell through his fingers and onto the hot backs of his hands. His drink tilted forgotten between his knees. And then—

"Remmick?"

The voice was female, soft, full, *Irish*. Remmick froze. His breath hitched so sharply it hurt. For one awful, impossible second, he thought grief had finally made him mad. He thought maybe this was what happened when a soul got stretched too thin in paradise—it started making its dead speak. Slowly, so slowly it felt like his bones had forgotten how to move, he lifted his head. He turned, and there, a few feet behind the bench, stood a woman with tears in her eyes and silver threaded through soft hair, her face warm and trembling with a smile she was trying to hold steady. Kathleen, his mother—*real*, not memory-soft. Not vision-blurred. Real enough that the late sunlight caught the wetness in her eyes. Real enough that the breeze moved the fabric of her clothes. Real enough that love hit him in the chest so hard he thought it might stop his heart.

Beside her stood a man with kind, grief-lined eyes and the same mouth Remmick had seen in his own face whenever he looked too hard in a mirror. Aidan. And just in front of them—bright as a blessing torn straight out of the past—stood a little girl with long red curls and freckles across her cheeks, smiling shy and radiant in the sunlight like no bullet had ever touched her, like no blood had ever stained her dress, like the world had been forced to give her back. *Róisín*. Remmick's eyes widened so far it hurt, his whole face broke open. Tears flooded harder, blurring them until he blinked and blinked and still couldn't make the sight stop shaking.

"Mam?…" Remmick breathed.

The word cracked clean in half. His gaze jumped to the man beside her, disbelieving, terrified to trust his own vision.

"…Dad?…"

Then to the child.

"…Róisín?"

Kathleen's mouth trembled with the effort of holding back her own sobs. She smiled through tears and took a step toward him.

"Yes, love," she said, her Irish accent full and living and beautiful enough to kill him where he stood. "Yes, it's me."

That was it. Remmick broke. A sob ripped out of him so violently, he had to brace one hand on the bench just to get up. He stood too fast, stumbling half a step forward, and Kathleen was already moving, already reaching, already opening her arms. He fell into them like a man crossing the finish line of a suffering that had gone on too long. Kathleen wrapped him tight, both arms around his shoulders, and Remmick clung to her with a desperation so pure it made him shake. He buried his face against her and sobbed into her shoulder like he was

young again, like the centuries in between had collapsed into ash. She held him with the fierce, familiar certainty only a mother had—one hand in his hair, the other spread across his back, rocking him just slightly while tears ran down her own face.

"Oh, my boy," Kathleen wept. "My boy, my beautiful boy…"

Remmick couldn't say anything. His throat had closed around the enormity of having her in his arms. Kathleen kissed the side of his head while crying openly now. Remmick's knees nearly gave out from the relief of her voice, her warmth, the smell of her, the reality of her hands on him. For years, for lifetimes, he had held onto scraps of them inside memory and grief and fury and hunger. And now here she was—not a dream, not a punishment, not a hallucination, she was *real*—and she was holding him like he never stopped belonging to her. Aidan came closer, his own eyes red and shining, his face wrecked with emotion. When Kathleen loosened her grip enough for Remmick to breathe, Aidan stepped in and Remmick turned into him at once, sobbing all over again as his father pulled him hard into his arms. Aidan held him and cried right along with him, the sound dragged low and broken out of a man who had once likely thought himself too steady to make noises like that. Aidan pressed his face briefly against the side of Remmick's head and laughed once through tears—not because anything was funny, but because grief and joy had smashed together so hard inside him there was no clean way out.

Remmick drew back only enough to look at him, his hands still on his father's arms as if checking the shape of him, the reality of him. Aidan's face was wet. So was Remmick's. Both of them wore the same dazed expression of men who had asked for nothing this impossible because asking would have hurt too much. Then Róisín stepped closer. She had been waiting with the fragile solemn patience of a child who understood something sacred was happening but didn't want to break it by rushing in. Remmick looked down and saw her, *really* saw her —the freckles, the smile, the bright living softness of her. His face crumpled again.

"Oh, sweetheart," Remmick whispered tearfully.

He stooped down to her and gathered her into his arms. She hugged him back at once with her little arms around his neck, warm and real and immediate. Remmick held her as if every missing year had become physical and could only be answered by holding tighter. Róisín held on with the unquestioning loyalty only children and the dead seemed to understand.

"I missed you," she said in her small voice.

The sentence hit him like a knife wrapped in velvet.

"I missed you too," Remmick sobbed. "I missed you *so* much."

When he finally stood again, Kathleen cupped the side of his face then, both hands warm against his cheeks, thumbs brushing away tears that would not stop coming. Remmick leaned helplessly into the touch. His face had gone young with grief. Younger than Smoke or Stack or any of them at the table had ever seen it. Younger than he had allowed himself to feel in centuries. He stared at her like a man trying to learn how to breathe in a world where miracles existed.

“How?” Remmick asked her tearfully.

The word came out wrecked. His brows pulled together. His lips trembled.

“How did you get here?” Remmick asked again, his voice breaking all over itself. “How? How are you here?”

Kathleen’s eyes glistened brighter. She smiled at him—not mysterious, not teasing, just full of something deep and knowing and tender enough to make the question ache worse. Behind her, Aidan rested a hand on Róisín’s shoulder. The little girl looked up at her mother and father, then back at Remmick, smiling softly as the sun lit up her hair like a halo of copper fire. Kathleen kept one hand on his cheek. And before she answered—the scene held there, breathless. As if somewhere, unseen, someone else in Pelmont had quietly heard the grief in a son’s voice and decided it had gone on long enough.

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Scene Song: “Linger” ~ The Cranberries

The answer came twenty minutes later, not in words from Kathleen, not from Aidan, not even from the quiet, radiant smile on Róisín’s face every time Remmick looked at her and had to reassure himself all over again that she was real. No—the answer came when he walked them back toward the heart of the reunion and saw, across the bright grass and the moving crowd, Smoke returning to the table with a second plate in his hand. That was when the knowing hit him, not thought. Not logic. Not some careful assembling of clues. Pelmont just placed it in him whole. *Smoke*. Remmick stopped walking. Kathleen noticed at once.

“What is it, love?” Kathleen asked, glancing over at Remmick.

Remmick didn’t answer; he was staring. Across the park, Smoke had just reached the table. He set his plate down with one hand, as Annie glanced up at him while their little girl was reaching for the rest of her food. Stack was saying something to Bo. Sammie leaned back in his chair. Jack and Michael were both mid-conversation. Nobody at the table looked surprised by anything. And suddenly that meant everything. They knew. They had *all* known. Remmick’s throat tightened. His eyes flooded again, this time so fast it almost made him laugh in disbelief at himself.

He looked once at Kathleen, at Aidan, at Róisín—his family, his family, standing there in the golden afternoon like a wound in the world had finally closed—then back at Smoke. Before Kathleen and Aidan could stop Remmick, he started walking—fast, then not quite running, but close enough that heads turned as he crossed the grass toward the table with tears already breaking free again. Smoke was about to lower himself into his chair when he looked up and

saw Remmick coming at him with that expression on his face—grateful, disbelieving. Smoke frowned instantly.

“The hell—”

Remmick reached him and didn’t let him finish. He pulled Smoke into a tight, emotional hug. It was so immediate, so wholehearted, so completely lacking in self-consciousness that the whole table froze. Smoke went rigid in sheer surprise. His face did exactly what it always did when emotion hit him from an angle he hadn’t prepared for: it shut down first. Flat. Frowning, almost offended, but he didn’t shove Remmick off. That was the thing.

Smoke frowned hard with discomfort, eyes flicking briefly toward Annie and then toward Stack as if one of them might explain why this white Irish man was suddenly sobbing into his shoulder in the middle of a barbecue—but after the first startled second, Smoke’s hand came up and landed lightly against Remmick’s back, not dramatic, not soft, but there. Around the table, everybody had gone still. Jack’s eyebrows shot up. Michael leaned back with a look that said *well, damn*. Bo looked openly caught off guard. Sammie blinked once, hard. Even Stack, who loved dysfunction like some people loved dessert, had gone quiet at the sight of it. Annie knew exactly what it was. You could see it in her face. Remmick held on for only a few seconds more, but the force of it made those seconds feel longer. Then he pulled back, his breathing ragged, his whole face wet with tears and gratitude. He looked at Smoke like he could not fit the enormity of what had just been done for him inside language.

“Thank you,” Remmick said tearfully. “Thank you…”

Smoke looked up at him with that same stolen-faced expression, jaw set, discomfort still visible in the faint pull between his brows. Remmick swallowed hard and tried again.

“For my family,” Remmick said, his voice breaking. “For bringin’ my family back to me.”

The table stayed silent. Smoke glanced down once, then back up at him. Remmick’s mouth trembled with emotion.

“But…why?” Remmick asked.

That question changed the air. Smoke’s face tightened slightly—not with anger, but with *memory*.

“Why would you do that for me?” Remmick asked, quieter, “Because I remember what you said. You said you didn’t care what happened to me…or my family.”

That made Smoke exhale slowly through his nose. He leaned back in his chair, then forward again, forearms resting briefly on the table like he needed a second to settle the truth in his mouth before he gave it away.

“Yeah,” Smoke said at last, voice low. “I said that.”

Smoke didn’t dodge it. Didn’t dress it up.

“’Cause at the time,” Smoke continued, looking straight at Remmick, “I didn’t.”

Remmick took that honestly; he just stood there and absorbed it. Smoke's expression didn't soften much, but it changed. The hard edge in it gave way to something heavier. Older.

"Then I saw your face," Smoke said.

The sentence landed plain and clean.

"At this table," Smoke went on, "when you was sittin' there talkin' 'bout not bein' able to find 'em. Your mama. Your daddy. Your little sister."

Smoke's jaw flexed once.

"I saw what that pain looked like on you."

Remmick's breathing went unsteady again. Smoke looked away for half a beat, then back.

"And I know that pain," Smoke said.

Annie's eyes dropped. The table knew where he was going before he said it. Smoke's voice stayed controlled, but something in it roughened anyway.

"That same pain," Smoke said, "is what me and Annie felt when we lost Lupine."

That name fell *softly* and devastatingly into the late afternoon air. Annie's hand moved at once, almost unconsciously, to their little girl where she sat beside her, alive in the afterlife and here and safe. Smoke glanced once toward his daughter too, then back at Remmick.

"No parent should have to carry that," Smoke said. "Nobody should be cut off from their people like that either. And no man who claims he changed—and proves he changed—oughta keep gettin' punished with that kind of emptiness if somethin' can be done about it."

The words hit Remmick so hard he actually briefly looked away for a second, overcome. Smoke kept going, because once he started saying the true thing, there was no point in backing away from it.

"You asked me before when enough was enough," Smoke said. "And I've been thinkin' on that, maybe too damn much."

Smoke glanced down at his hands, then back up.

"I still ain't forgot what happened. I ain't forgot who you were. But I can see who you are now."

Remmick stood there with tears sliding freely down his face, not even trying to wipe them anymore.

"And that kind of pain?" Smoke added, quieter now. "That ain't somethin' I'd wish on anybody. Not even you."

The silence after that felt full instead of empty. Remmick swallowed hard, trying to speak around the thickness in his throat.

“I…” Remmick stopped, shook his head once, still visibly overwhelmed. “I will *never* forget this.”

Remmick’s voice came raw, sincere, full of the kind of gratitude that changed a man from the inside out.

“I mean that,” Remmick said tearfully. “As long as I exist in this realm, I will never, *ever* forget what you just did for me.”

Smoke looked at him for a long second, face still guarded, but no longer cold.

“You gave me back my mother,” Remmick said tearfully, “my father and my sister. You gave me back the three people I thought were gone forever.”

Smoke looked down briefly, uncomfortable with direct gratitude in the same way some men were uncomfortable with open wounds.

“Aight,” Smoke muttered. “Don’t make it a whole—”

But Remmick shook his head, smiling through tears now.

“No,” Remmick replied tearfully. “No, I’m *gonna* make it a whole thing.”

That got the faintest huff out of Michael. Jack smiled outright. Even Stack’s mouth twitched. Smoke rolled his eyes, but the motion had lost all its bite. Remmick held out his hand then, not formal, not stiff, a real hand. A man’s hand. Offered with all the gravity of a vow. Smoke looked at it for a second. Then he took it. Their hands met hard — strong, locked, not polite but brotherly. Remmick tightened his grip, and Smoke returned it, both men standing there with that silent understanding passing between them that only pain, remorse, and mercy could build. For a second, that was enough.

Then, before his own pride could apparently stop him, Smoke pulled Remmick into one more brief hug—rougher this time, one arm around his shoulders, the kind of embrace that said *don’t misunderstand me, but this is real*. Remmick held on just as firmly. When they pulled apart, Smoke gave him one of those steady looks that said more than his mouth ever liked to.

“Go be with your people,” Smoke said.

Then, because Smoke could never leave a moment all the way tender without roughing it up a little, he jerked his chin toward the food tables and added,

“And tell ’em to get some of that red beans and rice before it’s gone,” Smoke added. “‘Cause I know damn well your Irish folks ain’t never had nothin’ like that.”

That got a laugh out of the table almost instantly. Smoke pointed once toward Annie without looking at her.

“And when they taste it and start havin’ a religious experience, make sure to let 'em know that Annie made it,” Smoke said.

Annie rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth lifted.

“I did,” she said with a smile.

Jack laughed. Michael shook his head with a grin. Even Stack let out a low chuckle. And even Remmick broke into a full, hearty laugh, real and deep and sudden enough that it surprised even him. It came out of him warm and rich, the kind of laugh that had been buried under centuries of grief and that had finally found its way back to daylight. Remmick shook his head, smiling through the last of his tears.

“I will,” Remmick said, still laughing. “I’ll tell ’em.”

As Remmick began backing away, Annie looked up at him then with her eyes warm and faintly shining, and gave him the smallest smile. Jack raised his cup in a little salute. Michael leaned back and shook his head with an amused grin like he’d just witnessed history and would absolutely be telling the story later. Stack looked between Smoke and Remmick with that sly expression of his and said nothing for once—which, from him, was practically reverence. Remmick glanced one last time at Smoke with a grateful smile and a nod before turning and walking away. Across the grass, Kathleen, Aidan, and Róisín were still waiting for him under the bright Pelmont sun. And as Remmick walked back toward them, the ache in his chest was still there—but it was no longer the ache of exile. Now it was the ache of something returned, something given back by the very man who once swore he did not care. And *that*, Remmick knew, was a mercy he would carry with him for the rest of eternity.

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Scene Song: “Before I Let Go” ~ Frankie Beverly & Maze

A little later, the reunion loosened into that golden-hour ease cookouts always seemed to earn if they survived the first rush of food, family politics, and loud opinions. The sun had softened some—not weak, just warmer now, richer. It lay gold across the park and caught on plastic cups, folding chairs, grills, jewelry, sunglasses, and every laugh that broke loose too loudly to be contained. Smoke from the grill had thinned into lazy ribbons. Kids were still running wild in packs, sticky now, half-tired and still refusing to sit down. The card tables were louder than ever. Somebody near the DJ had started dancing without shame. And over all of it, the DJ had Frankie Beverly & Maze rolling through the park with the song *“Before I Let Go.”* At the table, Jimmy, Sasha, Matthew, Cathy, Tom, Jane Ji, and Kellie were still eating the remains of their second plates and picking at the last good pieces of everything

worth protecting. Jimmy had a red plastic cup in one hand and the stubborn look of a man who would absolutely go get a third plate if challenged. Cathy happened to glance off to the side, then she smiled.

"*Oh*," Cathy said with a faint smile while reaching lightly across the table to tap Sasha's arm, "look."

Everybody's attention followed her gaze. A few feet away, at another table, Remmick sat with Kathleen, Aidan, and Róisín, and there was no mistaking it, not the resemblance, not the warmth, not the way his whole face had changed. Remmick was laughing at something his father had just said, one hand half-lifted with his cup, while his mother smiled at him, and Róisín leaned against his side, looking completely content. There was still emotion on Remmick's face if you looked closely enough—like joy had hit too close to grief not to leave marks—but it was joy all the same, *real* joy and relief so deep it looked almost holy, if holy had ever deserved to exist.

"He's got his family back," Cathy said while widening her smile.

Sasha looked surprised for half a second, then her whole face softened into happiness.

"Oh," Sasha said quietly, smiling, "oh, wow."

Jimmy looked over at Remmick, his brow furrowing.

"Well, how the fuck did he pull that off?" Jimmy asked. "When I talked to him last week, he said he couldn't make it happen for anything. Said he'd tried till he was basically spiritually concussed."

Jane Ji lifted her cup a little.

"When I was over by the food table with Stack earlier, he told me Smoke did it," Jane Ji said.

That made everybody at the table look back at her.

"*Smoke* did that?" Tom asked with raised brows.

"Yeah," Jane Ji said while nodding. "Stack said Smoke used thought intention and brought Remmick's family to him."

Matthew let out a low breath and raised his brows, looking back over at Remmick with fresh surprise.

"Well damn," Matthew said, "but why would it work for Smoke and not for Remmick though?"

Sasha watched Remmick for another second before answering.

"Maybe Remmick was too deep in his grief," Sasha said, "maybe he was too close to it, too overwhelmed to really focus his intention the way he needed to."

She shrugged softly.

“Sometimes when you want something that badly, it gets harder to reach for it clearly,” Sasha continued, “maybe it took somebody outside of that pain to do it.”

“That actually makes sense,” Jane Ji replied while nodding slowly.

Kellie smiled faintly, watching Remmick’s family table.

“That was really big of Smoke,” Kellie said with a faint smile.

Jimmy took a sip from his red cup, still staring across the park. Then, because he was Jimmy and could only allow sincerity to live for so many consecutive seconds before trying to bite it, he exhaled through his nose before nodding.

“Well, good,” Jimmy said.

Everybody at the table glanced at him. Jimmy leaned back in his chair, one arm hanging loose over the side, red cup balanced in his hand with full arrogance.

“Good,” Jimmy repeated, “because I was getting *real* fuckin’ tired of all his sad-banjo Irish shite.”

That got an immediate laugh out of Tom and Matthew. Jimmy kept going, his eyes still on Remmick in the distance.

“I mean, honestly,” Jimmy said, “the man’s been walking around looking like a fuckin’ haunted pub song for weeks. Very moving, very tragic, but fuckin’ hell.”

Jimmy took another sip of his drink.

“Now he’s got his family back,” Jimmy continued, “and clearly patched things up with Smoke and the rest of those poor fuckers, and maybe he can finally stop staring into cups like they personally contain the ruins of his fuckin’ soul.”

Kellie laughed so hard she nearly dropped her fork. Sasha covered her mouth, already laughing too. Matthew leaned back laughing.

“Haunted pub song is crazy,” Matthew said with a faint smile.

“It’s correct,” Jimmy said, pointing at him with the cup. “He’s been giving off full fuckin’ *tragic Irish weather* for at least a month.”

That broke the table into laughter again, even Cathy, who had tried to hold it together longer than the rest, laughed and shook her head.

“You cannot say tragic Irish weather about a real person,” Tom said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“Oh, I absolutely fuckin’ can,” Jimmy said with a faint frown of his own and a half smile. “But….I’m thrilled for him.”

Jimmy looked back over at Remmick and his family again, and the edge in his voice softened just slightly under the humor.

“Genuinely. It’s about fuckin’ time,” Jimmy added.

That landed, and the laughter eased into something warmer after that.

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Scene Song: “Boots On The Ground” ~ 803Fresh / “Score from Waiting To Exhale” ~ Jeffery Lewis

A little later, when the reunion had mellowed into that beautiful late-afternoon glow where everybody was fuller, louder, and happier than they had been two hours before, the DJ leaned into his mic and laughed.

“A’ight now,” The DJ said, “y’all know I couldn’t let this reunion end without this one.”

Then the opening instrumental of 803Fresh’s *“Boots On The Ground”* hit the park, and just like that, the whole place came alive all over again. People who had been sitting down shot up out of their chairs. Folks near the card tables started clapping before the beat even fully settled in. Somebody near the cooler shouted, *“OHHH, there it is!”* and that alone was enough to send three aunties hurrying toward the open space near the DJ. Across the grass, Smoke stood, Annie laughing as she got up with him, their little girl bouncing excitedly at their side. Stack and Mary got up too. Cornbread and his wife followed. Sammie and Pearline. Delta Slim. Bo and Grace. Chadwick. Bernie Mac. D.L. Hughley. Samson was already halfway to the dance space before Deborah even stood up, Ian and Isla laughing as they followed behind him. At Jimmy’s table, Sasha was the first one moving. The second she heard the song, she pushed her chair back and stood up with a grin.

“Oh, we *gotta* do this one, y’all,” Sasha said. “I’ve been waiting all damn day for this song.”

“All right now,” Jane Ji said after laughing and standing up, “I liked this song the first time I heard it a week ago in the grocery store.”

Then she pointed at Matthew. “

But I’m only going out there if you come too,” Jane Ji added.

Matthew put a hand to his chest like he’d just been given a noble and dangerous calling.

“Well,” Matthew said, standing, “I guess I’ll go and do it for the community.”

“And for rhythm, hopefully,” Jane Ji said with a smile.

“All right, well come on,” Tom said, standing up next, “if they’re going, we’re going.”

“Oh god,” Cathy said before lightly laughing and getting up with him and walking with him over to the dance floor, “we’re so going to embarrass ourselves out there.”

While laughing, George rose too and headed over to the dance floor. Kellie was already up on her feet but before she walked over to the dance floor, she looked over at Jimmy. Jimmy, meanwhile, was still sitting there finishing off the last swallow in his red cup like he fully intended to behave as though none of this concerned him.

“Jimmy,” Kellie said as Sasha looked at Jimmy with a brow raised and a half smile, “are you coming or what?”

Jimmy looked from one of them to the other, then sighed almost playfully and rolled his eyes as he set the cup down on the table.

“Yeah, yeah, all right,” he said, getting to his feet. “I’m coming to do all that—two-step, line-dancing, shite, calm yourselves.”

Sasha laughed and grabbed his wrist to tug him along. Jimmy allowed it with the exaggerated weariness of a man burdened by other people’s enthusiasm. By the time they reached the open space near the DJ, the dance floor wasn’t really a floor anymore—it was just people, rows of them, laughing and stepping into place as the song rolled over the park and everybody found their position almost by instinct. After they all picked up a plastic fan from the DJ, Sasha and Kellie took their places in line, and Cathy and Tom lined up just behind them. Jane Ji and Matthew stood next to George, already laughing before the steps even started. A little farther back, Remmick stood with Kathleen, Aidan, and Róisín, showing them the first part of the dance with a grin so bright it still looked strange on him in the loveliest way. And they were getting it too—a little looser than the rest, maybe, but *good*, good enough to blend in, good enough to belong.

Then the dance started for real, boots on the ground, fans in the air. The line shifted as one. The whole reunion moved together in that joyous, communal way line dances had of turning a crowd into one living thing—stepping, turning, clapping, sliding, laughing whenever somebody got off beat and laughing even harder when they found it again. Samson was all energy, all elbows, and a big smile, and Deborah was right there with him. Ian had the steps after a few beats and settled into them with that quiet, pleased smile of his. Smoke did the dance with the restrained cool of a man who wasn’t about to act like he was having too much fun, even while very clearly having fun. Annie, beside him, moved easier, lighter, laughing when Lupine tried to copy the grown folks and got the turn half-right. Stack, of course, danced like the music owed him money and he had come to collect.

Mary matched him step for step. Bernie Mac was hollering at people mid-dance, D.L. Hughley laughing while trying not to miss the next count, Chadwick smooth as hell with it. Michael B. Jordan was clean and confident with the footwork like he’d caught on faster than

he was willing to brag about. Ryan Coogler was smiling and hitting the steps with that easy, laid-back rhythm of somebody fully enjoying himself, and Jack O'Connell was keeping up with the steps almost perfectly, and was almost impressed by his own ability to line dance at a Black family reunion. Bo and Grace were enjoying themselves so much that they missed part of one turn and didn't care, and then there was *Jimmy*, for the first few seconds, he watched, learned, and clocked the pattern.

Then, to the surprise of absolutely everybody who didn't know by now that Jimmy Crystal had an almost offensive amount of rhythm when he wanted to, he got it down—perfectly, not just the steps but the *attitude* of it. Jimmy slid into the dance like he'd been waiting his whole life for a chance to line dance with arrogance. He hit the counts clean, his shoulders loose, his footwork sharp, and after another beat he started throwing just a little Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal flavor into it—a little extra snap in the turn, a little more swagger in the step, a tiny flash of ego in the way he landed the beat like he was personally doing the song a favor by understanding it this quickly. A few feet away, Jack caught it first and did a double-take.

"Oh shit," Jack said to Michael, "is he actually *killing* it on this dance floor?"

Michael glanced over at Jimmy dancing and then laughed.

"Yeah, looks like all these Black folks' energy done rubbed off on him," Michael responded, resulting in Jack laughing.

A few Black folks near the edge of the dance space turned and stared at Jimmy, and then smiled and then laughed. One older woman near the front pointed at Jimmy and said: *"Okay then!"* And Bernie Mac, spotting Jimmy from across the line, barked out a laugh so loud it cut through the music around him.

"Uh oh!" Bernie shouted, grinning hugely. "Look at little Jimmy! Boy out here cuttin' *up* on this dance floor!"

That made half the dance floor laugh while still keeping time. Jimmy, hearing it, didn't miss a beat. He just glanced Bernie's way with his signature confident half-smile like *yeah, obviously,* then hit the next turn even cleaner. Kellie laughed so hard she nearly missed her own step. Sasha looked over at him with pure disbelief and joy.

"Jimmy, all right, I see you!" Sasha exclaimed with a smile.

Jimmy glanced back at her with a light laugh without breaking rhythm.

"Okay, how is it that you're this good at this?" Matthew asked with a faint frown and a half smile.

Jimmy gave a little arrogant shrug in the middle of the dance.

"Because I am offensively *talented*," Jimmy responded with his signature smile.

That sent Jane Ji and Cathy off laughing again. Behind them, Remmick caught the next sequence with his family, and when he looked up and saw Jimmy absolutely killing the dance

in front of half the reunion, he laughed—really laughed—and the sound of it carried clean through the music. It was the kind of laugh a man gave when life had stopped punishing him for one second and had instead decided to hand him something wonderful. And so as the line dance went on, with the whole reunion moving together under the warm Pelmont sky, the last song of the day turned into a celebration bigger than itself. And in the end, maybe that was what Pelmont had been building toward all along.

Scene Song: "Score From Waiting To Exhale" ~ Jeffery Lewis

Remmick got his family back. He got his mother, his father, and his sister. He got forgiveness too—not cheap forgiveness, not easy forgiveness, but the real kind, the kind that had to be dragged through pain and truth and humility before it could sit down beside a man. And with that, he found the fellowship and love he had been starving for since the world first took everything from him.

Jimmy got his second chance. He got fixed where he had once been broken, changed where he had once been diseased, *redeemed* where he had once been monstrous. And more than that, he got something he never should have had to go without in the first place: a family that saw him, understood him, laughed with him, called him on his occasional nonsense, all while *still* making room for him at the table.

Smoke and Annie got their little girl back. Stack and Mary, Cornbread and his wife, Sammie and Pearline, Bo and Grace, Delta Slim—all of them got what had been denied to them on Earth for far too long…*Freedom. Real* freedom. Freedom from chains, from ownership, from terror, from the ugliness of being told their joy had to stay small and their lives belonged to somebody else. Here, it didn't. Here, they finally got to live fully.

Cathy and Tom, Jane Ji, Matthew, and George got something people often reached whole lifetimes for without ever knowing how to name it: the simple, ordinary happiness of safety. Of friendship. Of laughter that did not have fear behind it. Of being able to sit, eat, argue, joke, love, and know that the day would end with everyone still there.

Spike got his mother back, and in getting her back, he got the one thing horror had tried and failed to destroy in him—*tenderness*. He and his mother could finally live in a world where love did not have to keep looking over its shoulder.

Samson got his second chance too, because Ian had given it to him, and because Ian had believed in him long enough for Samson to become exactly what he had always been meant to be: bright, loud, joyful, full of motion and life, a spark that refused to go out.

And Ian—Ian finally found the ordinary world, not just for himself, but for everybody around him. The ordinary world he had spent twenty-eight years on Earth longing for. Searching for. Hoping still existed somewhere beyond blood and fear and infection and ruin. He found it here at last, not in silence, not in perfection, but in people, in music, in food, in laughter, in *family*. In the ordinary miracle of a day where nobody had to be *afraid*.

All of them had found it, and maybe that was the real mercy of Pelmont: that after everything they had lost, everything that had been taken, everything that had been twisted, brutalized, buried, or broken—they had finally found a place where nothing good had to be borrowed or taken away from them; nothing loving had to be hidden, and nobody had to earn the right to be whole.

So under the bright Pelmont sky, with the music still going and the dance still moving and everybody laughing as the final song of the reunion carried them into the evening, they danced—not like people still waiting for life to begin, but like people who had, at long last, been given their lives back.